NEW

ARMED FORCES • PARTY ELITE • PROPAGANDA • INDUSTRY

Bringing History to Life

124 pages on the men who formed Hitler's inner circle

HANS FRANK

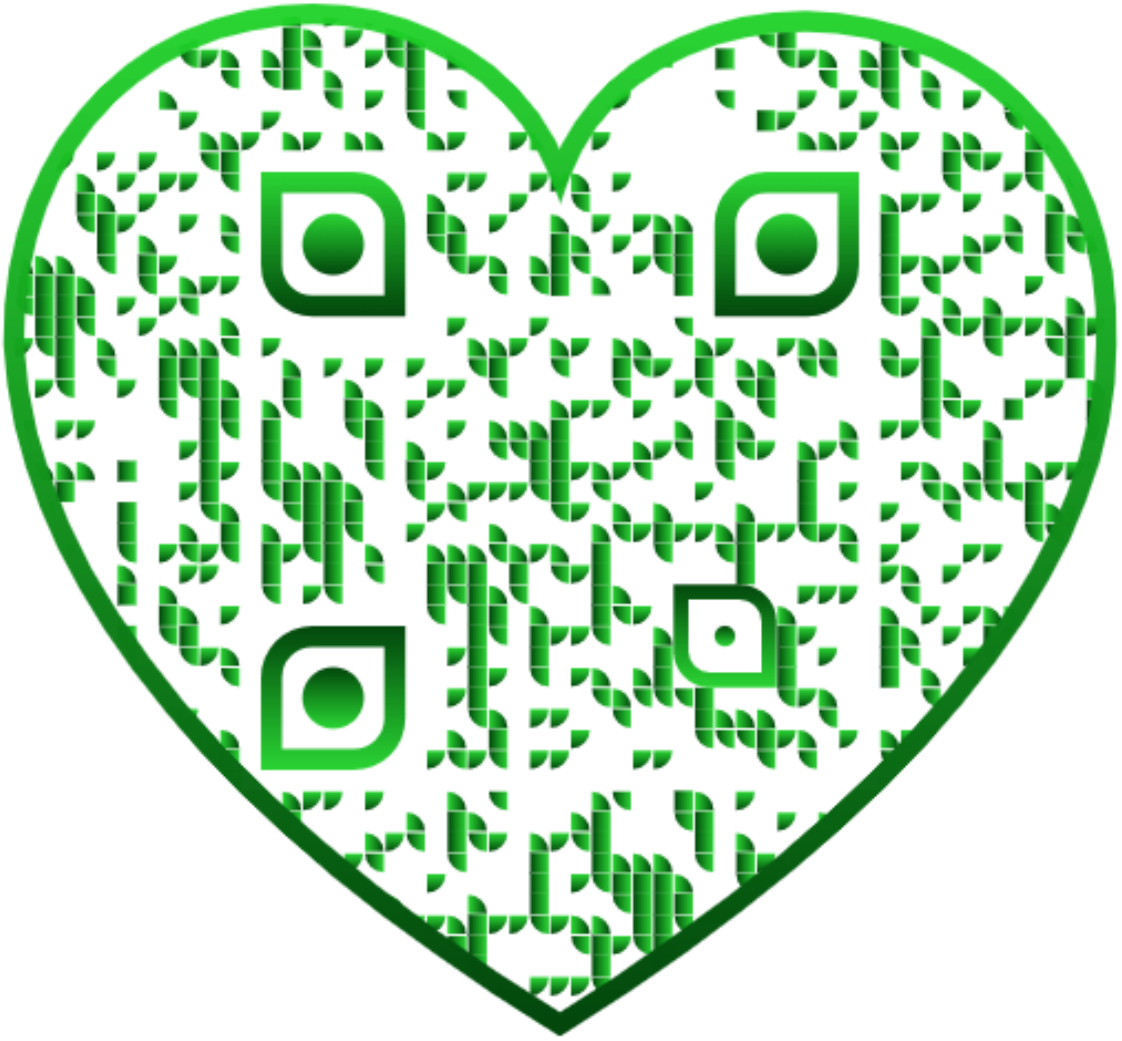
HEINRICH HIMMLER

JOSEPH GOEBBELS

ERWIN ROMMEL

HITLER'S HENCHMEN

Meet the men behind the Nazis' crimes – from profiteering businessmen and indoctrinated schoolteachers to Hitler's chillingly cold inner circle



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WELCOME

HITLER'S HENCHMEN

For 12 years, Nazism permeated every part of German society – from school classrooms to concentration camps. Behind the terrifyingly efficient regime stood ordinary men and women, who acted as tiny cogs keeping the machine running.

At the very top, Adolf Hitler relied on a handful of loyal men who orchestrated the indoctrination, delivered success on the battlefield and crushed any internal enemy.

This is the story of Hitler's henchmen – from obscure pen-pushers to the party's charismatic leaders.

Enjoy the issue.

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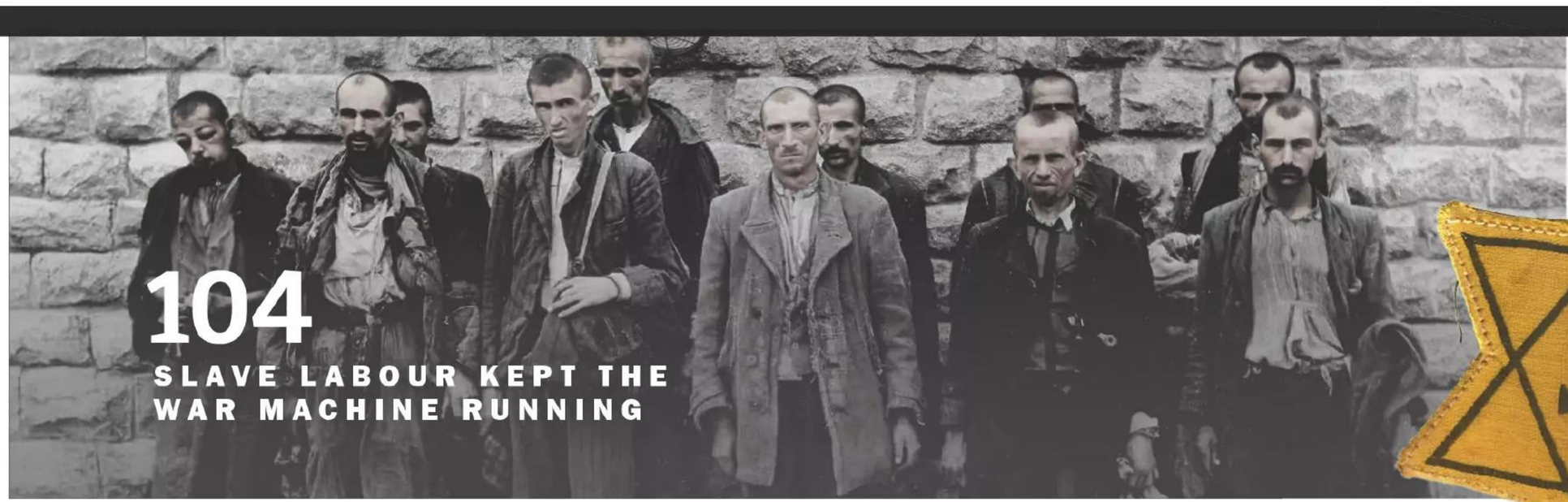

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Hitler's henchmen

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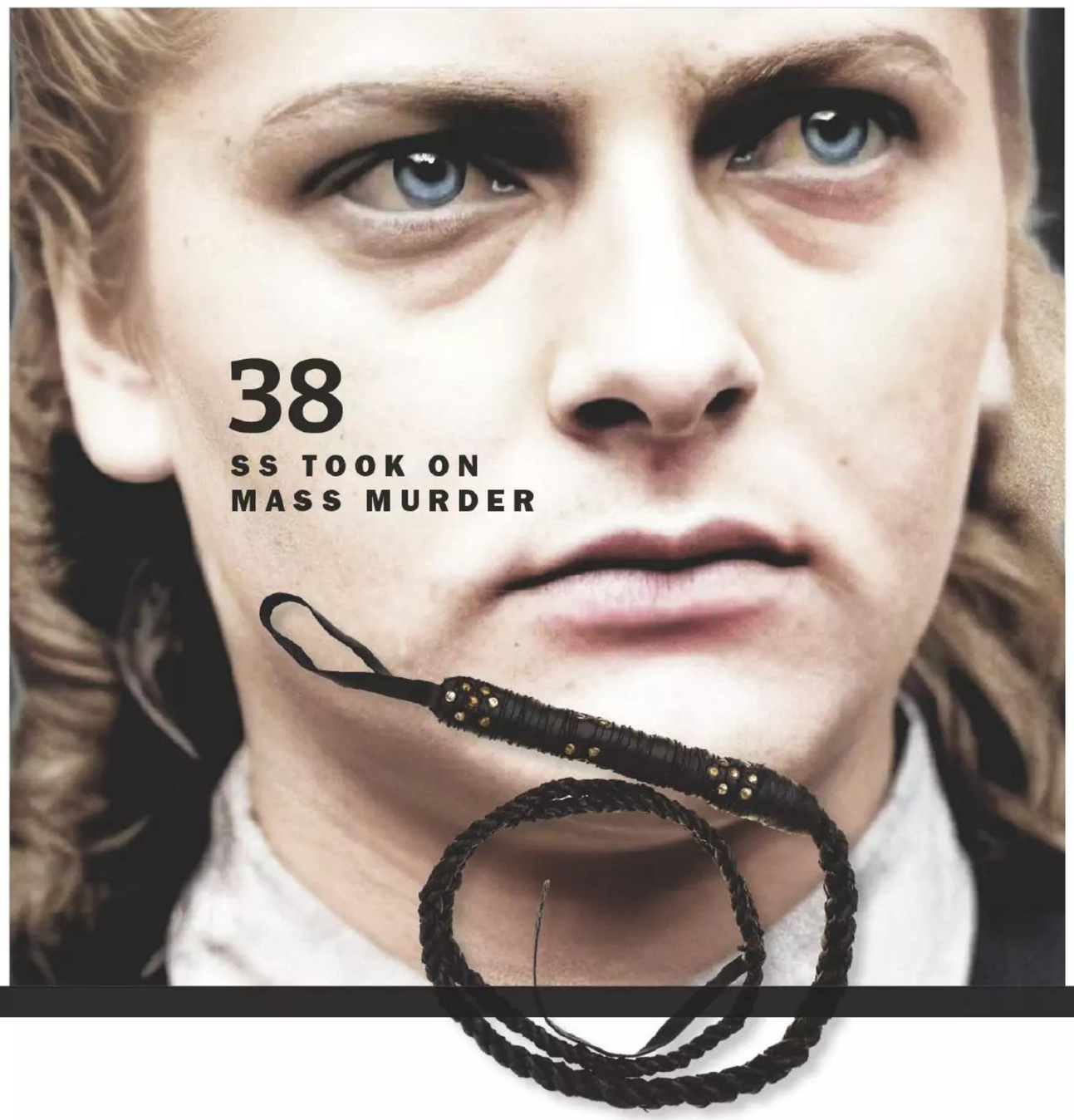

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HITLER'S HENCHMEN RULED The Third Reich

1934

NIGHT OF THE LONG KNIVES

SA leader Ernst Röhm and his thousands of brownshirts have become such a threat to Hitler that he has Röhm murdered along with the rest of the SA leaders.

SHUTTERSTOCK

1935

HITLER ORDERS MOBILISATION

Hitler orders the German army and air force to rearm. He secures weapons and grenades through close cooperation with industrial magnates such as Alfred Krupp.

SHUTTERSTOCK

1935

NUREMBERG LAWS ARE INTRODUCED

Hans Frank, a leading Nazi lawyer, later responsible for horrific war crimes in Poland, helps draft laws that strip Jews of all rights in Germany.

1941

TERROR ESCALATES IN OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the SS intensifies the extermination and exploitation of local populations, subjecting them to massacres, famine and deportations.

SHUTTERSTOCK

1919

HITLER AND ROSENBERG JOIN THE PARTY

Adolf Hitler and Alfred Rosenberg become early members of the German Workers' Party, which later becomes the Nazi Party. Over the next few years, ideologue Rosenberg develops the anti-Semitic ideology that becomes the foundation of Nazism.

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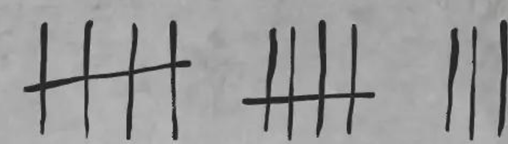


1923

BEER HALL COUP FAILS

Hitler attempts a coup in Munich with the support of the SA and military generals, among others. After the failure, he writes *Mein Kampf* in prison, inspired by Rosenberg's ideology.

SHUTTERSTOCK

1933

HITLER BECOMES CHANCELLOR

Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany after winning the German elections. His victory is secured by the mastermind behind Nazi propaganda, Joseph Goebbels.

SHUTTERSTOCK

1933

POLITICAL OPPOSITION IS CRUSHED

After an arson attack on the Reichstag, Hermann Göring establishes the Gestapo secret police. Soon after, communists and other opponents are arrested.

MALENE VINTHER & MIDJOURNEY & SHUTTERSTOCK

1936

YOUTH IS MOBILISED FOR NAZISM

By law, all Aryan boys between the ages of ten and 14 are required to join the Hitler Youth, led by the charismatic Baldur von Schirach. Here, young people are indoctrinated to support the regime and spread its ideology.

1939

WORLD WAR II BEGINS

Under the leadership of Hitler's lapdog, General Wilhelm Keitel, Germany invades Poland and thus begins World War II. From day one, the Nazis are behind mass executions and repression.

SHUTTERSTOCK

1942

WANNSEE CONFERENCE

Heinrich Himmler and his henchman Reinhard Heydrich plan the Final Solution – the extermination of all European Jews – in a villa at Wannsee in Berlin.

1943

TIDE OF WAR TURNS

After major defeats at Stalingrad and Kursk, and even for Germany's favourite general, Erwin Rommel, in Africa, the tide of war has turned. Now it is only a matter of time before Germany surrenders.

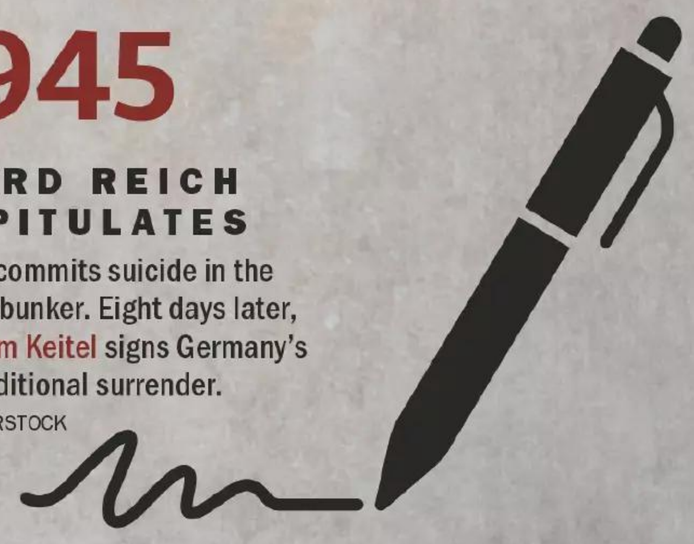
MALENE VINTHER & MIDJOURNEY

1945

THIRD REICH CAPITULATES

Hitler commits suicide in the Führerbunker. Eight days later, Wilhelm Keitel signs Germany's unconditional surrender.

SHUTTERSTOCK



Inner circle seized power

All over the Nazi empire sat influential figures who helped Adolf Hitler consolidate his power and carry out his crimes: from the top of the party to wealthy industrialists.

BUNDESARCHIV & GETTY IMAGES

PARTY · The NSDAP and its leaders

Four men were crucial in securing the Nazi Party's grip on power and carrying out the Holocaust.

BUNDESARCHIV & GETTY IMAGES

HEINRICH HIMMLER

Leader of the Aryan elite corps SS from 1929, Heinrich Himmler developed the organisation from a small bodyguard unit into one of Nazi Germany's most feared institutions. Himmler orchestrated the Holocaust through the establishment of extermination camps like Auschwitz and Treblinka and was key to the Nazis' terror and persecution of their enemies. His fanatical belief in Nazi ideology and "Aryan" supremacy made him one of Hitler's most loyal and brutal henchmen.

JOSEPH GOEBBELS

As newly appointed propaganda minister in 1933, Goebbels used his full control over the country's media to shape the German worldview. He created a cult of personality around Hitler as an almost divine leader and prepared the Germans for war. Through film, radio and newspapers, he ensured the party's propaganda reached every corner of society. Even in the final days of the war, he urged resistance and followed Hitler in death by committing suicide with his family in 1945.

REINHARD HEYDRICH

Known as "Himmler's executioner", Heydrich led the Gestapo and the SS's feared security service. He was a key figure in devising the "Final Solution" against Europe's Jews. His ruthless efficiency made him feared even among other Nazi leaders, and he crushed all resistance with extreme brutality. Heydrich organised the Einsatzgruppen – mobile death squads that murdered hundreds of thousands in Eastern Europe during the war. He was assassinated by Czech resistance fighters in 1942.

MARTIN BORMANN

As Hitler's personal secretary from 1941, Bormann became one of the most influential behind-the-scenes figures in the Nazi bureaucracy. He controlled access to Hitler, which gave him enormous power over the party's decisions in the chaotic final years of the war. Bormann was a fanatical Nazi who worked in secret to secure the party's grip on power and undermine internal rivals. After Hitler's death, he attempted to flee Berlin, but his fate remains unclear – he possibly died in May 1945.

Göring Rommel Keitel Guderian

ARMED FORCES · Military leaders

When the war began, Hitler placed his fate in the hands of innovative and loyal generals.

HERMANN GÖRING

As head of the Luftwaffe, Hermann Göring led Germany's invincible air force in the early years of the war. The loyal Nazi played a crucial role in the war's early triumphs such as the victories over Poland and France. He was Hitler's deputy and a flamboyant figure who, over time, spent more time on parties and champagne than on warfare. His failure in the Battle of Britain and the failed attempt to supply surrounded German troops in Stalingrad by airlift weakened his position.

ERWIN ROMMEL

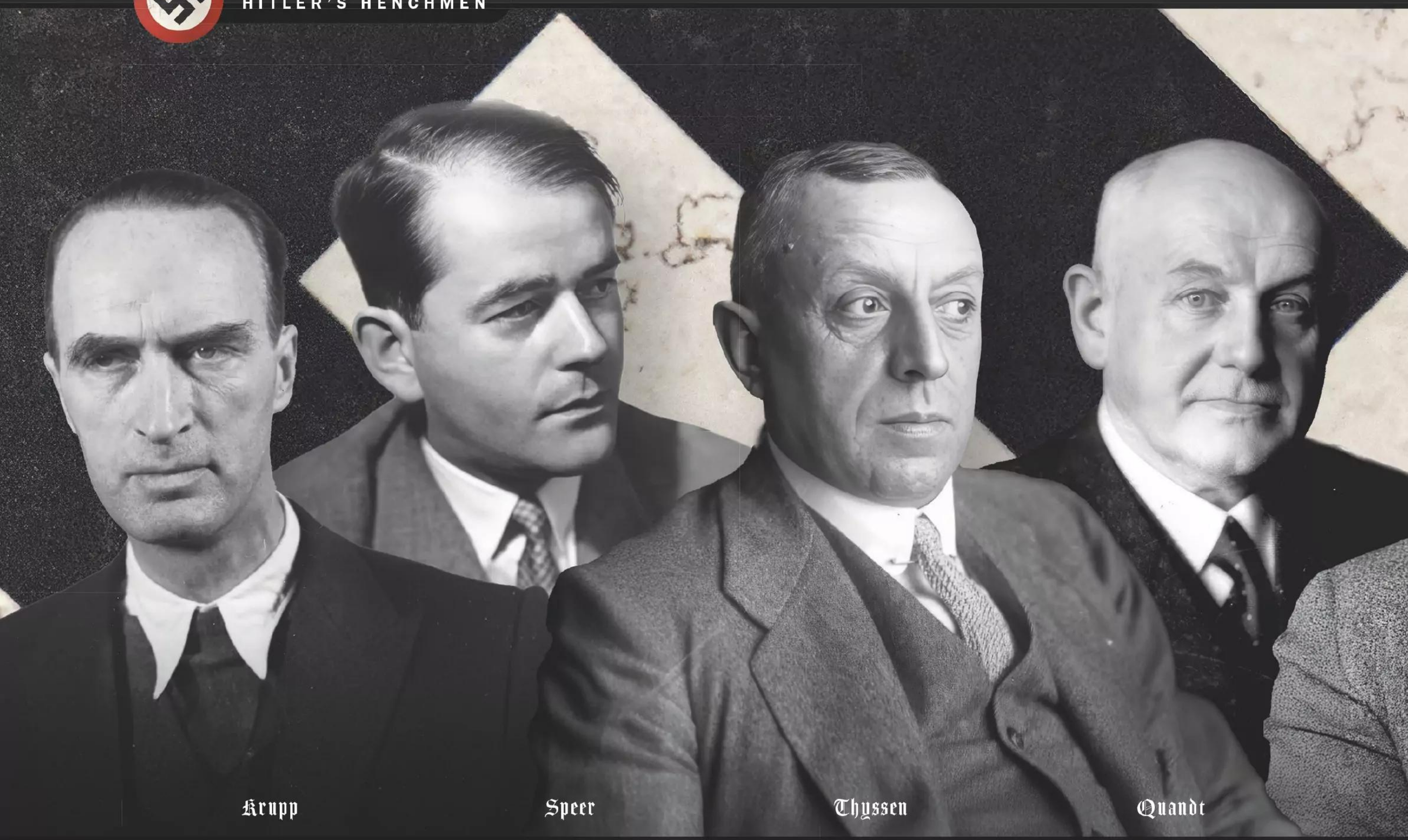
Rommel became famous for leading the 7th Panzer Division in France in 1940, where the world first saw the German blitzkrieg. Several times, the general rapidly broke through enemy lines, which collapsed. Later, against all odds, he won key victories in the battles against the Allies in North Africa in 1941–42, earning the nickname the "Desert Fox". Towards the end of the war, Rommel was suspected of knowing about plots against Hitler and was forced to commit suicide in October 1944.

WILHELM KEITEL

Keitel was head of the Armed Forces High Command (OKW) from 1938. Hitler's right-hand man and an obedient servant, Keitel signed orders such as the "Kommissarbefehl", which commanded the execution of Soviet political prisoners, and actively supported war crimes in Eastern Europe. His inability to challenge Hitler's often unrealistic strategies contributed to Germany's later defeat. After the war, he was convicted at the Nuremberg trials and executed in 1946 for his role in the Nazis' crimes.

HEINZ GUDERIAN

Guderian was a pioneer in armoured warfare and developed blitzkrieg tactics that quickly crushed Poland and France. As leader of the armoured forces in Operation Barbarossa in 1941, he contributed to the early successes against the Soviet Union. He often clashed with Hitler over strategy and was dismissed in 1941 but reinstated in 1943 as general inspector. His skills were crucial in turning Hitler's expansionist dreams into reality in the early stages of the war.



INDUSTRY · Economic supporters

Even before the seizure of power, a number of Germany's biggest industrial magnates supported Adolf Hitler.

ALFRED KRUPP

As head of the Krupp family, Alfred took control of the company that produced guns, tanks and ammunition for Hitler's war machine. The Krupp group exploited thousands of forced labourers from the occupied territories and concentration camps to maximise production during the war. The Krupp family had supported the Nazis financially since the 1930s, making them a cornerstone of Germany's rearmament. After the war, Alfred was convicted of war crimes.

ALBERT SPEER

Appointed minister of armaments in 1942, Speer transformed Germany's economy into a war machine under the concept of "total war". He organised millions of slave labourers from concentration camps to maintain production despite Allied bombing. Speer was a charismatic technocrat who impressed Hitler with his efficiency and ability to solve logistical crises. At the Nuremberg trials he claimed ignorance of the Holocaust, but his role in the Nazi regime was undeniable.

FRITZ THYSSEN

One of Germany's leading steel magnates, Thyssen supported Hitler from the start. He saw the Nazis as a barrier against communism, which he feared would wipe out his business empire, and donated significant sums in 1923 alone, including 100,000 gold marks, to Nazi activities. His company Thyssen AG supplied steel and resources for Germany's rearmament. Although he later broke with the Nazis, his early contributions were crucial for the party's growth.

GÜNTHER QUANDT

Quandt wasn't an early supporter of the Nazi Party, but his conservative, nationalist views made him sceptical of socialism and communism. After Hitler's rise to power, he joined the party in 1933. Quandt's factories produced weapons and ammunition crucial to Germany's war machine. His companies, such as AFA, supplied batteries for submarines and other military vehicles. Quandt also profited from "Aryanisation", where Jewish businesses were confiscated and sold off cheaply.

Schirach Ley Hierl Scholtz-Klink

CIVILIANS · Influence in daily life

A number of key figures were hired to secure support for Nazism among ordinary Germans.

BALDUR VON SCHIRACH

As leader of the Hitler Youth from 1931, he indoctrinated millions of young Germans into fanatical Nazis with blind obedience to Hitler. To ensure full control over the young, Schirach made membership of the Hitler Youth compulsory from 1936 and ensured that girls were also taught their role as "Aryan" mothers. After the war, he was convicted at Nuremberg for his role in Nazifying Germany's youth.

ROBERT LEY

Head of the German Labour Front (DAF) from 1933, Robert Ley dissolved the communist and socialist trade unions and placed Germany's workers under Nazi control. Through programmes such as "Strength Through Joy", he offered holidays and leisure activities to the working class to strengthen support for the regime. After Germany's defeat, he was charged with war crimes but hung himself in his Nuremberg prison cell before the trial.

KONSTANTIN HIERL

Whilst head of the Reich Labour Service (RAD), Hierl organised compulsory labour service for young men from 1935. His programmes combined physical work with military training and indoctrination in Nazi values. Hierl ensured that civilians contributed to Hitler's vision of a disciplined and militarised society. He survived the war and died in 1955 without being held accountable for his role.

GERTRUD SCHOLTZ-KLINK

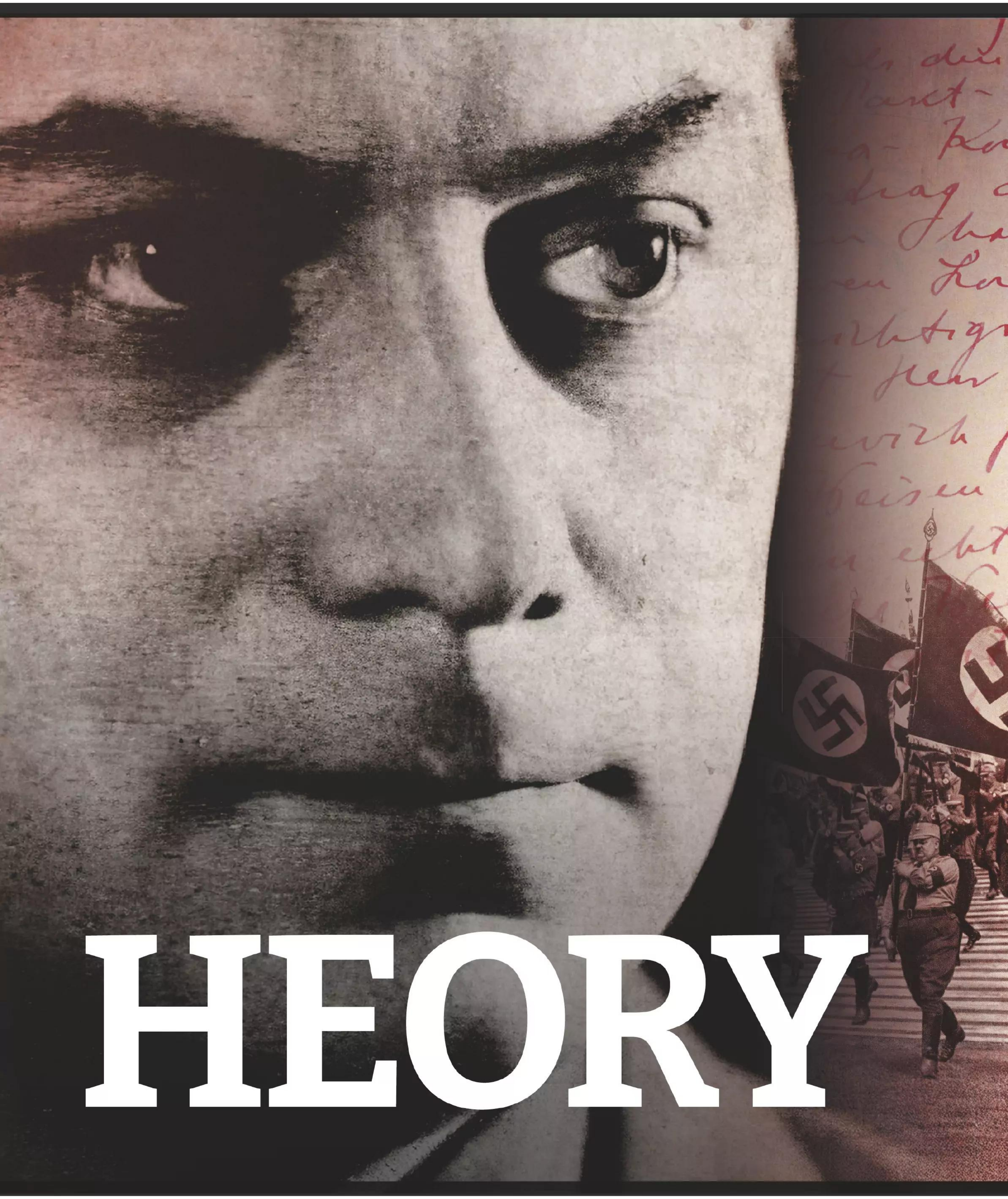
In 1934, Scholtz-Klink was appointed Reich Women's Leader by Hitler and put in charge of the party's women's organisation NS-Frauenschaft. Her task was to align Germany's women with Nazi ideology, where they were primarily seen as mothers and wives. She organised nationwide courses in housework, child-rearing and "racial purity" and encouraged women to support the soldiers at the front both financially and by, for example, sewing winter clothing.

No sooner had 26-year-old architect Alfred Rosenberg joined the Nazi Party in 1919 than he was made its chief ideologist. In that role, he devised the party's bizarre race theories, which placed Jews and people of colour at the bottom of the evolutionary scale, while so-called Aryans were destined to rule over Europe.

BUNDESARCHIV, GETTY IMAGES & SHUTTERSTOCK

Alfred Rosenberg's theories were recorded in several books and became a cornerstone of the Nazis' persecution of Jews.

Russian architect invented RACE T



HEORY

In the years leading up to World War I, Adolf Hitler drifted around Vienna. He had originally arrived in the city to train as an artist or architect, but everything failed. His application to the Academy of Fine Arts was rejected and he couldn't be admitted to architecture school either, because he had dropped out of secondary school. So, instead of studying, the young man hung around cafés and wandered the streets, observing everyday life.

One day, he noticed a man with long, black curls wearing a long coat. Hitler was puzzled. He had seen Jews before, but none had looked quite like this man.

"My first thought was: Is this a Jew?"

As though hypnotised, he stared at the figure with the unfamiliar attire and strange hair.

"[T]he longer I gazed at the strange countenance and examined it feature by feature, the more the question shaped itself in my brain: Is this a German?"

The incident, which Hitler described in his political manifesto *Mein Kampf* in 1925, supposedly sowed the seeds for his theories that Jews were fundamentally different from other Germans, laying the foundation for an intense hatred that, just a few decades later, would cost millions of Jews their lives in the Holocaust.

The failed artist did not convert this hatred into action on his own. To create the theoretical basis for mass extermination, he had help from several accomplices: skilled ideologues and propagandists. Among them, the Russian architect Alfred Rosenberg stood out. Through precisely formulated theories expressed in books, pamphlets and party programmes, Rosenberg shaped Hitler's ideas about the so-called Germanic race's superiority and right to rule over others.

Rosenberg was spellbound by Hitler's speeches

Rosenberg and Hitler first crossed paths in Munich in 1919. Then aged 29, Hitler had recently been discharged after World War I, the final days of which he had spent recovering from temporary blindness caused by mustard gas at the front. After Germany's defeat, he settled in Munich, where he'd also lived briefly before the war. In his frustration over Germany's loss, Hitler joined the strongly anti-democratic and anti-Semitic DAP (*Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* – German Workers' Party), a forerunner of the

[It] changed my entire personal fate and merged it with the fate of the German nation as a whole.

Alfred Rosenberg on meeting Hitler in 1919.

Rosenberg became the mastermind who systematised Hitler's racist ideas and gave them legitimacy.
BUNDESARCHIV

NSDAP (Nazi Party). His ambition, burning rage and skill as a speaker soon made him one of the party's most prominent men.

That same year, Alfred Rosenberg arrived in the city. He had been born 26 years earlier – in 1893 – in Reval in Tsarist Russia (now Tallinn, capital of Estonia). His parents were Baltic Germans, wealthy enough to fund Rosenberg's education. He first studied at the Riga Polytechnic Institute and later at Moscow University, where he graduated as an architect in 1917.

But his career never got off the ground, because that same year the Bolshevik Revolution broke out. Rosenberg supported the counter-revolutionaries, and when he realised the fight was lost, he fled to Germany. Munich attracted many Russian immigrants at the time, making it a natural destination for Rosenberg.

Life in the Bavarian capital was anything but easy for the refugee. Initially, he survived only thanks to a charitable committee that provided shelter and meagre meals for Russian refugees. Like Hitler, Rosenberg developed a burning hatred of Jews. This hatred had likely taken root in Russia, which had been plagued by violent pogroms throughout the latter half of the 19th century and into the early 20th century.

During the revolution, Rosenberg came to associate Jews with Bolshevism – the ideology that had forced him to flee his homeland and a promising career. So, when he first heard Hitler speak, he was thrilled.

"Here I saw a German frontline soldier embarking on this struggle in a manner as clear as it was convincing, counting on himself alone with the courage of a free man. That was what, already after the first 15 minutes, drew me to Adolf Hitler," Rosenberg later wrote.

This brief encounter, he added, "changed my entire personal fate and merged it with the fate of the German nation as a whole".

In 1919, Rosenberg joined the DAP.

Ideology was born in the reading rooms

Whether Hitler also felt Rosenberg's sense of shared destiny is unclear, but what is certain is that the Russian architect had something the ambitious Hitler lacked. Hitler's fiery speeches certainly had impact within the party, but his rage lacked direction along with a theoretical framework to underpin his racist outbursts – much as Marx's theses supported communists and Lenin's theories underpinned Bolshevism. Hitler himself recognised this need.

"Anti-Semitism as a political movement may not and cannot be moulded by emotional factors but only by recognition of the facts," he wrote in 1919.

The facts – or something resembling them – were what Rosenberg could provide. He developed his theories while spending days in Munich's libraries and art galleries, where he devoured the writings and pamphlets on racial theory that flooded Europe at the turn of the 20th century. Most of them aimed to highlight the superiority of the so-called Aryan peoples over other "races". According to the texts, where other races caused chaos and misfortune, white people brought progress and prosperity wherever they lived.

Rosenberg devoured it all. Without examining the sources more closely, he repeated their main theses – mixed with his own thoughts on Bolshevism and Christianity – in books such as *Die Spur des Juden im Wandel der Zeiten* (*The Track of the Jew Through the Ages*) and *Unmoral im Talmud* (*Immorality in the Talmud*). Both »

Men from the Nazis' paramilitary corps, the SA, enforced the boycott of Jewish shops.
BUNDESARCHIV

Boycott was the first step

One of Hitler's first acts in power was to order a boycott of Jewish shops, and soon Germans feared shopping with their Jewish neighbours.

The world looked on with mounting unease when Adolf Hitler took office as Germany's chancellor on 30th January 1933. The fear was justified, as soon became clear as international newspapers throughout the spring reported a growing number of cases of harassment, assault and even murder of German Jews.

Concern was especially high in the United States and Britain, and the idea soon arose to boycott German goods. Hitler categorically rejected the reports of Jewish persecution as *Gräuelpropaganda* (atrocity propaganda), false stories planted by Jews to damage Germany's reputation. In retaliation, he declared a boycott against Germany's Jews. The boycott took effect on 1st April 1933. Nazis daubed the fronts of Jewish-owned shops with Stars of David and slogans such as "Germans! Defend yourselves! Don't buy from Jews" and "The Jews are our misfortune."

At the same time, the regime stationed SA troops outside the shops. The boycott was officially called off the following day, but it had already made an impact. The idea that it was wrong to trade with Jews had taken root in the German consciousness, and for many small, family-run Jewish businesses, the boycott marked the beginning of the end.

» books were published in 1919 – the year Rosenberg and Hitler became party comrades – and Hitler was enthusiastic.

"I soon found that he was deeply under the spell of Rosenberg … He was the anti-Semitic, anti-Bolshevist, anti-religious troublemaker, and Hitler seemed to have a very high opinion of his abilities as a philosopher and writer," wrote Ernst Hanfstaengl, Hitler's friend and comrade in his early years, about the Austrian's early enthusiasm for Rosenberg.

Rosenberg turned Jews into traitors

Rosenberg became truly useful to Hitler when, in 1922, he linked Jews with the so-called stab-in-the-back myth – a theory claiming that Germany lost World War I because Jews within German society had undermined the war effort. Rosenberg did not invent the myth. The term was first used when the German general Erich Ludendorff dined with the head of the British military mission in Berlin, General Sir Neill Malcolm, in the autumn of 1919. Malcolm asked Ludendorff what he thought had led to Germany's defeat. Ludendorff listed several possible factors, including the home front, where he expressed that the government's support for the army had been inadequate.

"Do you mean, General, that you were stabbed in the back?" Malcolm asked with interest. Ludendorff, happy to have found a cleverly worded excuse for the defeat, lit up. He eagerly confirmed that was exactly what he had meant.

The phrase quickly took on a life of its own. Among those who adopted it was the army's commander-in-chief, Paul von Hindenburg. In a parliamentary hearing later that year, Hindenburg stated that Germany's defeat was partly due to a stab in the back. The stab, he claimed, came from the Social Democratic government, which had initiated peace talks prematurely, and from internal revolutionary uprisings inspired by the Russian Revolution. That Jews had played any part in this stab-in-the-back was not mentioned in either Ludendorff's or Hindenburg's »

The theory of traitorous Jews gained so much momentum that it helped Hitler be elected as chancellor in 1933.
BUNDESARCHIV

Aryans were 1800s master race

In the 19th century, natural science developed a compulsion to categorise and rank animals and plants into strict groups. Humans, too, were assessed and arranged into a hierarchy based on origin and appearance – and here, the Aryan people quickly emerged as the supreme group.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the view of humanity and nature became increasingly scientific. All living things were to be analysed, categorised and ranked; for instance, in the early 1700s, Swedish zoologist and botanist Carl Linnaeus became one of the first to classify animals and plants. In 1735, following extensive research, he divided humans into four main groups: American, European, African and Asian. In doing so – unknowingly – he helped give rise to racial science, which would be explored and documented over the next hundred years, even by respected scholars.

A few decades later, German physician JF Blumenbach adjusted the categories by measuring human skulls. From the skulls' shape, Blumenbach and his contemporaries believed they could infer intellectual ability – and they agreed the European race was the most intelligent of all. One figure who had a particularly strong influence on Nazi racial doctrine was the German linguist and India expert Max Müller. Müller noted and described the similarities between the ancient Indian languages and the European ones. He believed – mistakenly – that ancient Indian culture must have dominated Central Asia and spread from there to Europe. Müller called those who spoke the ancient Indian language "Aryans", a word that in Sanskrit means "the noble ones".

Müller himself did not see his research as a contribution to the debate on racial hierarchy. But after his death in 1900, the word "Aryan" took on a life of its own. Pamphlets and books – of varying credibility – described the Aryans, the white race, as the pinnacle of human civilisation. Among the most enthusiastic readers were the Nazis, who quickly adopted the theory.

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Blood became decisive

In 1935, Nazi Germany enacted the so-called Nuremberg Laws, which categorised Germans according to their "racial purity". The aim was to prevent marriages between Jews and non-Jews, which the Nazis believed would dilute pure German blood. From that point on, people were classified as follows:

GERMAN
(FULL-BLOODED)

To be considered a full-blooded German, a person had to have four German grandparents. Full-blooded Germans were not permitted to marry either full Jews or half-Jews. Marriage to quarter-Jews was allowed, as their children would only be one-eighth Jewish and thus classified as German.

QUARTER-JEW
(MISCHLING 2ND DEGREE)

A quarter-Jew had one German parent and one half-Jewish parent. Marriage between a quarter-Jew and a German was permitted, since their children would only be one-eighth Jewish and therefore considered German. However, marriage to another quarter-Jew was not allowed.

HALF-JEW
(MISCHLING 1ST DEGREE)

A person with two fully Jewish grandparents and two German grandparents was considered a half-Jew. Half-Jews could apply for permission to marry someone who was not a full Jew, but permission was typically limited to other half-Jews or three-quarter-Jews.

JEW
(FULL-BLOODED)

A person with three or four Jewish grandparents was regarded as a full Jew. A full Jew was considered the most impure member of German society and was forbidden from marrying non-Jews. In this way, the Nazis aimed to prevent the spread of Jewish blood within society.

A chart published by Nazi propaganda showed how to easily define who was of Jewish or German descent.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

» accounts. But in the DAP and other parties and associations that made up a rapidly growing thicket of far-right groups, it was a different story. According to these groups, Jews held the real power in Germany, had prevented the army from giving its best, and thus cost Germany victory in World War I.

The accusation was nonsense. Jews at that time did not occupy positions like ministerial posts in Germany that would have made such power possible.

Nor were they significantly represented in other areas that could confer political power – such as the officer corps, civil service or the executive boards of major industrial firms. Years of exclusion had long ensured that.

Rosenberg rejected such objections. The discrimination keeping Jews from holding important positions was, he wrote, "the great lie which we have been constantly spoon-fed".

Jews became Nazis' greatest enemy

In his pamphlet *Zionism, the Enemy of the State*, published in 1922, Rosenberg tied all the conspiracy theories together. Jews were now blamed for both the government's disgraceful act of laying down arms and negotiating peace with the enemy, and for the revolutionary uprisings that had flared up in Germany towards the end of the war. The reason was simple, Rosenberg claimed. The Jews supported the enemy – the British. A British victory, after all, could secure the Jews the homeland that the British had promised in a public statement known as the Balfour Declaration in return for Jewish support during World War I.

"The Zionist organisation in Germany is nothing more than an organisation that pursues a legalised undermining of the German state," Rosenberg concluded in the pamphlet.

With his version of the stab-in-the-back myth, the Nazi ideologue turned a vague conspiracy theory into a loaded weapon. With a stroke of the pen, the myth exonerated Germans of all blame for their defeat and placed responsibility squarely on the Jews.

Two years earlier, Hitler had broken with the DAP and founded his own party, the NSDAP (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* – National Socialist German Workers' Party), better known as the Nazi Party. Now he was ready for the next step – a coup, under the banner that the internal Jewish enemy was damaging Germany. During a meeting at the Bürgerbräukeller beer hall in Munich on the evening of 8th November 1923, he fired his pistol into the ceiling and declared, "The national revolution has broken out!"

During the failed coup, which claimed the lives of 16 Nazis, Rosenberg remained loyal to Hitler. His commitment earned him the status of *Alte Kämpfer* – Old Fighter – one of the core members of Hitler's inner circle who had stood by him and Nazism from the very beginning.

When Hitler was imprisoned as punishment for the coup attempt, he appointed the reliable Rosenberg as acting party leader. While Rosenberg kept the party afloat, Hitler wrote his political manifesto from his cell. He received visits from top »

While the yellow star was quickly introduced in occupied areas, it was not required for "German Jews over the age of six" until 1941.
BUNDESARCHIV

BUNDESARCHIV

In the war's final years, Alfred Rosenberg (left) served as Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories. There, he was responsible for horrific atrocities and in 1946 was executed for war crimes.

» Nazis and close associates. Whether Rosenberg helped him write *Mein Kampf* is unclear, but several passages were drawn from the ideological arsenal that Rosenberg had provided Nazi Germany's future leader. Hitler, for instance, repeatedly claimed that Jews held key positions of power in Germany.

"I now realised that the Jews were the leaders of Social Democracy," wrote Hitler, who also claimed that the country's newspapers were run and written by Jews. "From the publisher downwards, all of them were Jews," he claimed.

When Hitler was released on 20th December 1924, he returned as party leader, now firmly resolved to seize power legally through elections. Meanwhile, chief ideologist Rosenberg refined his theories. In 1930, his best-known work was published: *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*. In it, he laid out a clear racial hierarchy. At the bottom of the pyramid were Jews and black people – "races" that, according to Rosenberg, were dirty, useless and uncivilised. Asians possessed some intelligence and capability, but were not equal to the Indo-European peoples, who stood at the top.

The highest status was reserved for the so-called Nordic race, a group that included Scandinavians, the English and Germans. Of these, the Germans – also known as Teutons – were the most exalted humanity could produce.

"Germanic man appeared in world history as creator. He sailed around the entire earth. He discovered millions of worlds," wrote

Laws came thick and fast

From the moment they took power, the Nazis introduced new racial laws that were far-reaching. Jews were stripped of their status as citizens of the Reich and banned from everything from teaching at universities to flying the German flag.

Prohibition on

BEING GERMAN

Only citizens of "German or related blood" could now be Reich citizens. Others were classed as state subjects without any political rights.

OWNING A PET

Jews were banned from owning pets. The justification was that food should not be wasted on animals, but the aim was also to isolate Jews even further.

INTERRACIAL INTERCOURSE

Sexual relations between Jews and citizens of German blood were prohibited. Punishment ranged from imprisonment to the death penalty.

DOMESTIC WORKERS

Jews could no longer employ women of "German blood" under the age of 45 in their households. The age limit was intended to prevent unwanted pregnancies that could "pollute" German bloodlines.

FLYING THE FLAG

Jews were not allowed to fly the German national flag. The law was intended to make clear that they were no longer part of the German Reich, and from 1939 the offence carried the death penalty.

SITTING ON BENCHES

Benches were reserved for people of German blood, and the penalty for sitting on "racially pure" benches ranged from fines in the early years to deportation to concentration camps later on.

Rosenberg, who believed this elevated status was inherited. Germans, he claimed, descended from a Nordic race – the so-called Aryans – who had originally lived on a now-vanished continent. From there, they had spread across large parts of the world and founded a number of ancient civilisations – including the great Indian, Greek and Roman cultures. Even the ruling classes of ancient Egypt, Rosenberg believed, belonged to the Aryan race.

Racial mixing was the road to ruin

That these ancient civilisations had collapsed was due to one thing alone: racial mixing. Intermarriage and the mixing of blood between Aryans and "inferior races" had always, throughout history, resulted in the weakening of the Aryan race. That, Rosenberg argued, was what had happened to the Romans. Only the invasions of the Germanic tribes had saved the Aryan civilisation.

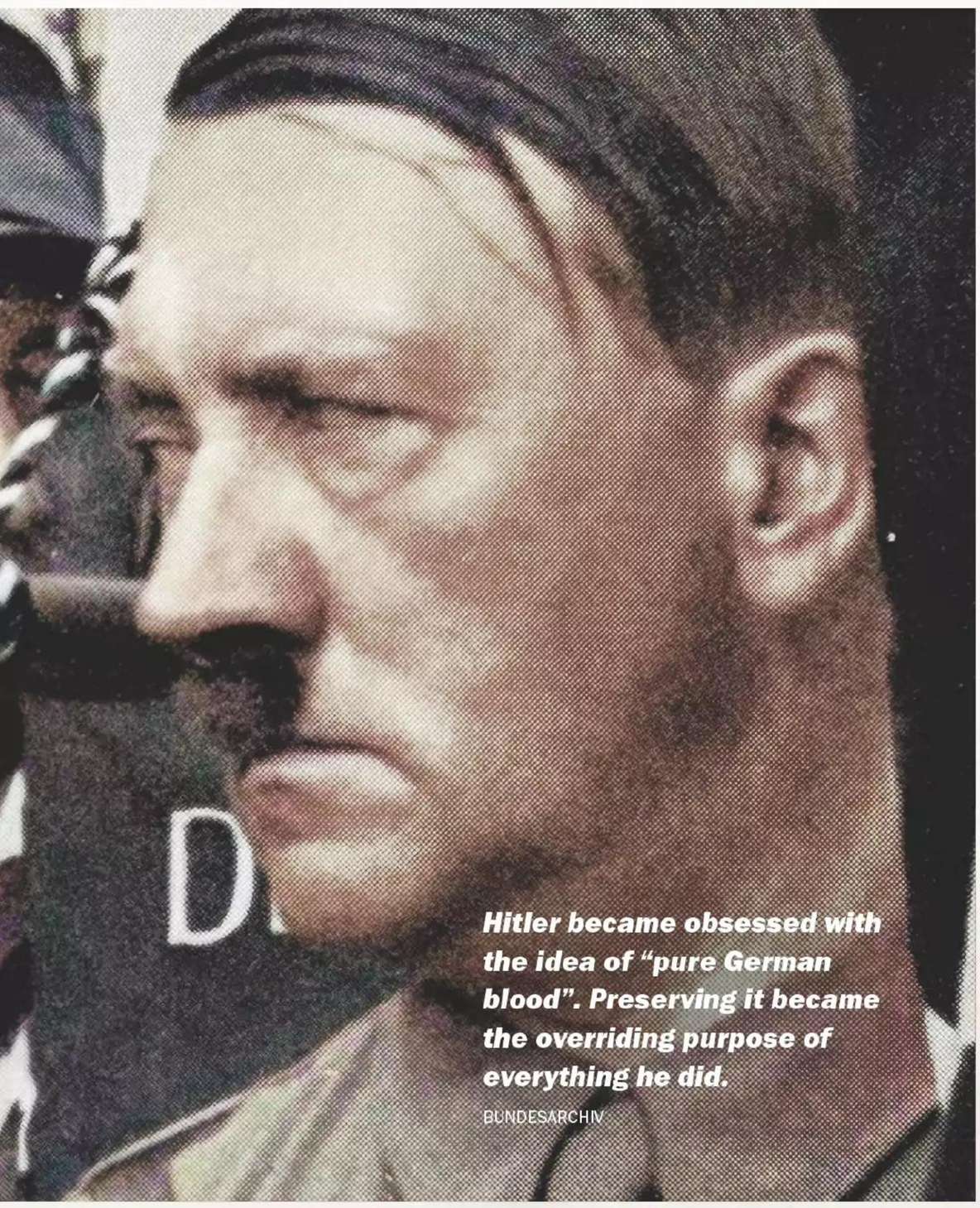
Now, the Aryans were once again under threat from racial mixing – this time through marriages between Germans and the "inferior races" who, to Rosenberg's dismay, lived in the Weimar Republic. The fight against mixing races, he argued, was just as crucial as the fight against the political system.

"A people can still pull itself up out of political servitude, but never again from racial pollution. If the women of a nation give birth to black or Jewish bastards, if the muddy tide of black art passes unhindered over Europe as today, if the Jewish brothel literature comes into homes, if the Syrian of the Kurfürstendamm is also regarded as a folkish comrade and a marriageable man, then such conditions will ensure that Germany – and the whole of Europe – will be populated in its intellectual centres by bastards," Rosenberg wrote angrily.

As a safeguard against this, the Germans – as the highest of the Aryans and a *Herrenvolk* (master race) – were to rule over other races and carry out a "merciless cleansing". When *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* was published in 1930, the Nazis were already dangerously close to power. After the Nazi Party's strong showing in the presidential and Reichstag elections of 1932, Hitler was appointed chancellor in January 1933. Even before seizing power, Jews in Germany had begun to feel the impact of Rosenberg's and the Nazis' theories.

"I would like to say that we suffered already at the beginning of the 30s, not only from 1933, but even earlier. We suffered a lot. At least I personally suffered from a lack of feeling of security when I was among non-Jews," Jewish Hillel Schechter later said of his childhood in the German city of Leipzig.

"My father and mother owned a sporting goods shop, which was doing quite well. As middle-class Germans, they hired a housekeeper, and when I arrived, they also hired a nanny for me. Our lives were hopeful. But dark clouds were gathering on the horizon as we entered the 1930s. From the window of our apartment, I could see, even at the age of six, groups of communists fighting with groups of Nazis across the street. And in 1932, my uncle Max was killed by stormtroopers in Chemnitz, simply because he was a Jew. No one was arrested. But the word 'Nazi' started to have meaning for me," Schechter recalled.



Hitler became obsessed with the idea of "pure German blood". Preserving it became the overriding purpose of everything he did.
BUNDESARCHIV

Jews were expelled from sport clubs

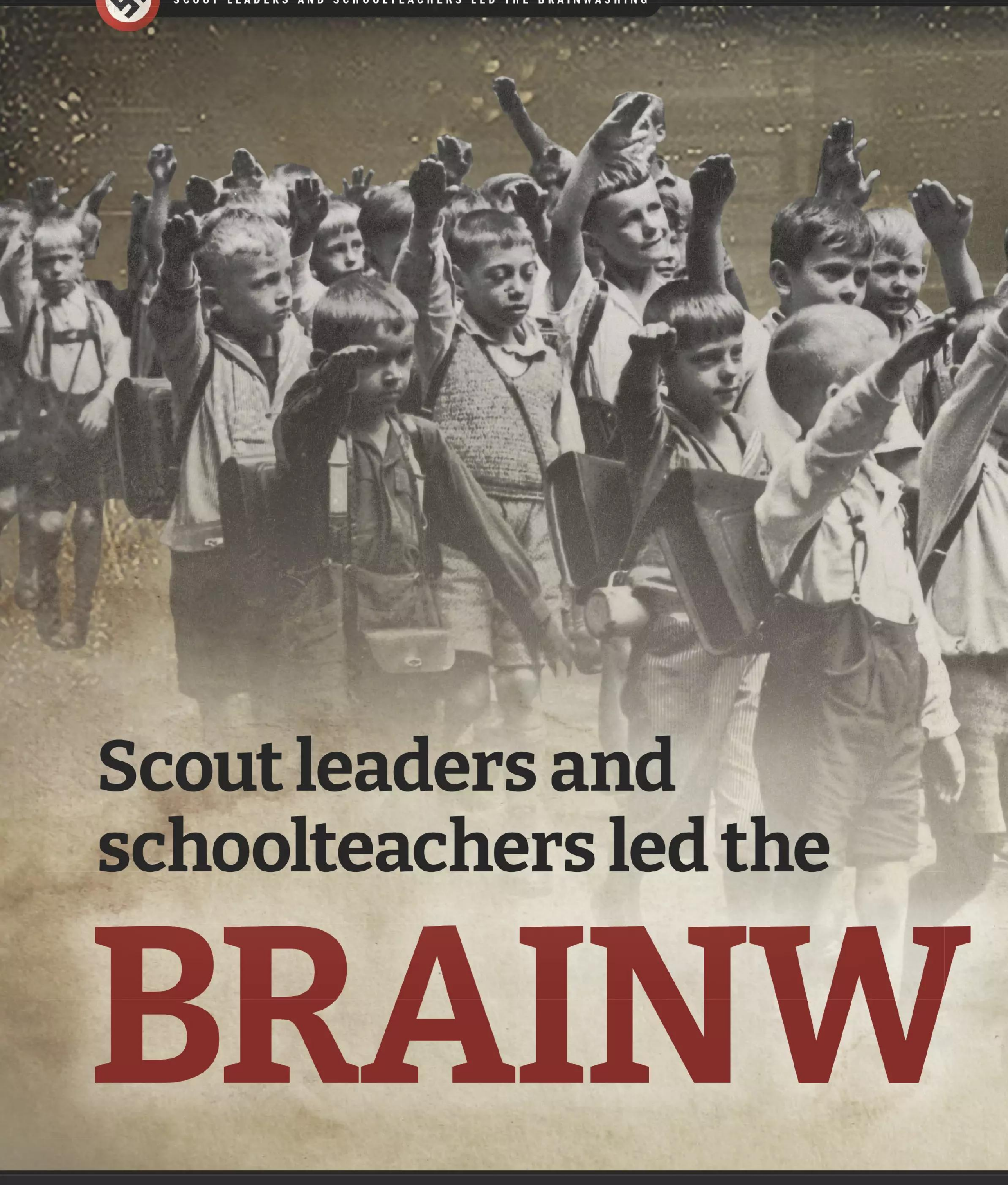
With Hitler as chancellor, the segregation truly began. On 1st April 1933, a boycott of Jewish businesses and shops was launched. "[It] had a very serious effect. My father's ability to make a living gradually diminished, as well as that of all of the people like him," Schechter later wrote of the events that followed the Nazi laws.

More laws followed in rapid succession. On 7th April 1933, the Nazi Party banned Jews from holding positions as civil servants and over the following months, Jews were banned by law, statute and decree from, among other things, joining sporting and other clubs, visiting the beaches at Wannsee near Berlin, and writing editorials in newspapers. Jewish lawyers were barred from practising and Aryans who visited Jewish doctors could no longer have the treatment reimbursed by health insurance.

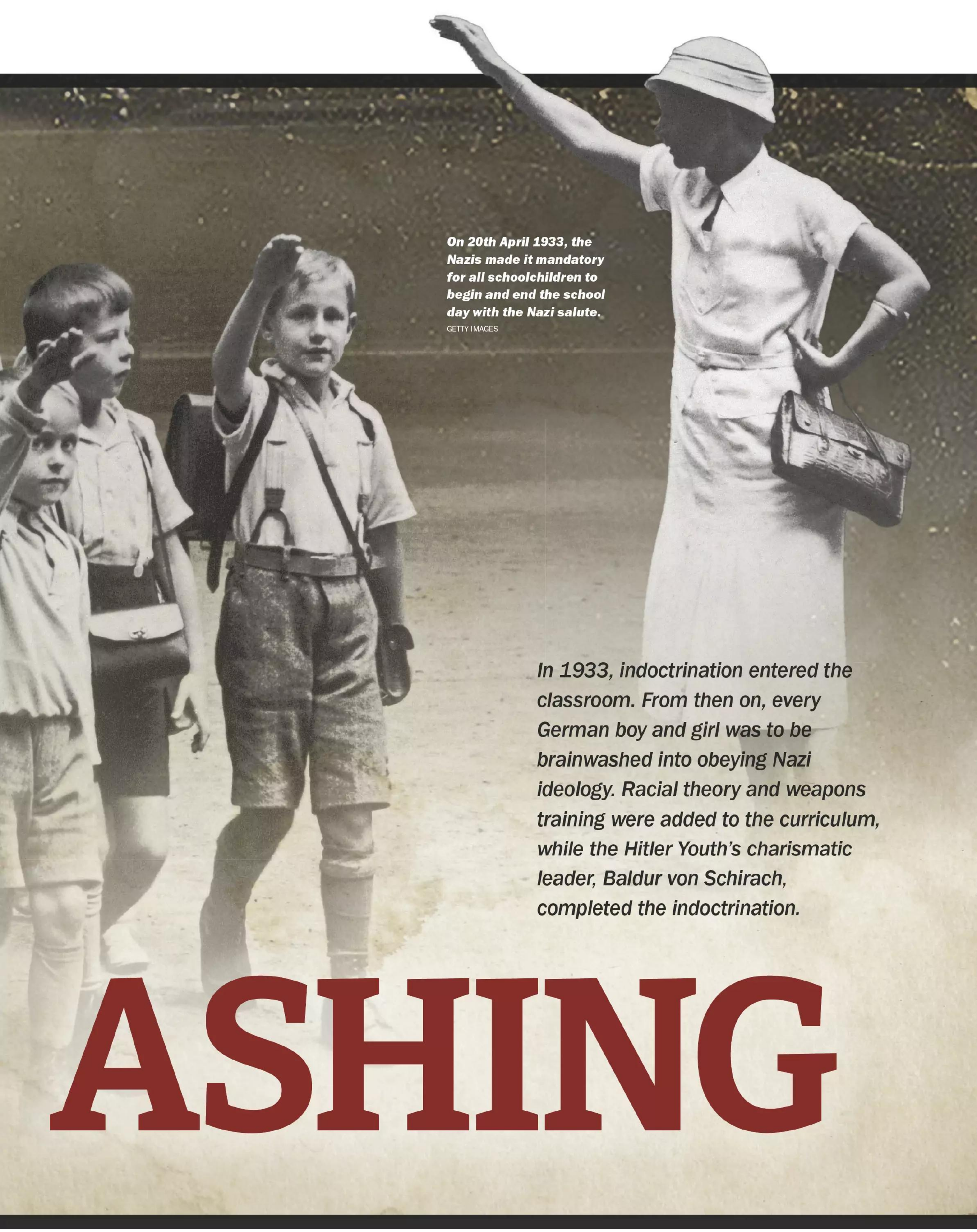
The culmination came in the autumn of 1935 with the Nazi regime's introduction of the so-called Nuremberg Laws. Under the new regulations, Jews and Germans were banned from marrying or having sexual relations with each other, and Jews were stripped of all civil rights. "A Jew cannot be a citizen and thus have the right to hold office," the law stated.

The laws were the most far-reaching consequence yet of Rosenberg's theories on race and blood mixing. They also answered the question Hitler had asked himself decades earlier when he encountered a Jew in the streets of Vienna. Jews were not Germans. But the laws were only the beginning. As the years ahead would show, it was not only the Jewish nationality the Nazis sought to revoke.

They also wanted to strip them of their very right to exist. □



Scout leaders and schoolteachers led the BRAINW



On 20th April 1933, the Nazis made it mandatory for all schoolchildren to begin and end the school day with the Nazi salute.
GETTY IMAGES

In 1933, indoctrination entered the classroom. From then on, every German boy and girl was to be brainwashed into obeying Nazi ideology. Racial theory and weapons training were added to the curriculum, while the Hitler Youth's charismatic leader, Baldur von Schirach, completed the indoctrination.

ASHING

Alfons Heck

Born: 3rd November 1928 · Died: 11th April 2005

Alfons Heck was just four years old when the Nazis seized power in Germany on 30th January 1933. He experienced Nazi propaganda first-hand at school and in the Hitler Youth. After the war, he wrote down his experiences, which can be read in the book *A Child of Hitler*.

SHUTTERSTOCK & PARALLEL JOURNEYS

Five-year-old German boy Alfons Heck had only been attending school for a few weeks when his life suddenly changed. Heinz Ermann, a classmate and friend Alfons had already grown close to, left school in the spring of 1933. Alfons didn't understand why. True, the fearsome teacher Mr Becker had often picked on Heinz, but that wasn't unusual. Everyone feared Mr Becker's frequently used cane, and more than one boy had wet himself at the thought of the painful and humiliating punishments for which the teacher was known.

But Heinz's case was different, as the class would soon understand. Heinz was Jewish – a people whom Mr Becker claimed were so dangerous that children must stay far away from them.

"No German boy can ever be true friends with a Jewish boy, because no matter how nice he seems, he'll grow up to be your enemy," Mr Becker sternly told the boys.

Alfons was puzzled but didn't seriously question what the teacher said. After all, Mr Becker knew everything, he later recalled in his memoirs.

Alfons Heck was far from the only child subjected to intense indoctrination after the Nazi takeover. The future greatness of the Third Reich depended on the regime's ability to turn children and young people into fervent Nazis. And because the regime didn't trust parents to deliver the desired results, they gave the task to schools and youth organisations – institutions now firmly under Hitler's control.

Schools were Nazified from the beginning

The job of reforming Germany's education system fell to Bernhard Rust, who was appointed minister of the newly formed Ministry of Science, Education and Culture on 1st May 1934. Rust had already been purging teachers and students – including Jews such as Heinz Ermann – in a similar role in Prussia. One of his first official acts was to require teachers and students to greet each other with "Heil Hitler".

As minister of education, he went even further. Teachers deemed Jewish or "politically unreliable" – meaning opponents of the Nazi regime – who hadn't already been purged, were simply dismissed. Curricula and reading lists were overhauled to reflect Nazi ideals and the concept of the creation of a racially pure master race. Besides physical education – intended to produce strong, healthy, combat-ready

"We shouted at the top of our lungs, with tears streaming down our faces: 'Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil!' From that moment on, I belonged to Adolf Hitler"

Alfons Heck on his first meeting with Adolf Hitler in 1938

The youth was quickly converted to love and admire the messages of Nazism. Here, Hitler Youth members celebrate another election victory for Hitler – this time in 1936.
BUNDESARCHIV

citizens – subjects such as German and, in particular, racial theory received top priority.

Under Rust's leadership, the teaching of Nazi ideology – with its twisted views on Jews and other minority groups – began as soon as children entered school, around the age of five or six. The notion that Germans and the Nordic race were superior was drilled into them using every possible method. In class, children had their heads and faces measured, and those with the most so-called Aryan features were praised in front of their peers.

New textbooks furthered the indoctrination. Alfons Heck, for instance, read that Nordic races, according to Nazi biologists, had "limbs which are large in proportion to the body. That suits our sense of beauty. Peoples with another racial makeup apparently have quite another ideal of beauty." The message was clear: only the Aryan ideal was acceptable.

Books were just one part of the Nazi propaganda machine available to teachers. Classrooms were decorated with posters comparing Jews and Aryans, accompanied by slogans such as "From the face speaks the soul of the race."

These materials were produced by outlets such as Verlag der Stürmer, the publishing arm of the notorious anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Stürmer,* known for its grotesque caricatures of Jews. The books planted racial hatred in young minds under the guise of innocent stories.

One infamous book was *Der Giftpilz (The Poisonous Mushroom),* a story presented as a mother-and-son outing in the forest. As they pick mushrooms, the mother says:

"Look, Franz, human beings in this world are like the mushrooms in the forest. There are good mushrooms and there are good people. There are poisonous, bad mushrooms and there are bad people. And we have to be on our guard against bad people just as we have to be on guard against poisonous mushrooms." She then adds: "The Jew is the most dangerous poison mushroom in existence."

Gas attacks and ballistics entered curriculum

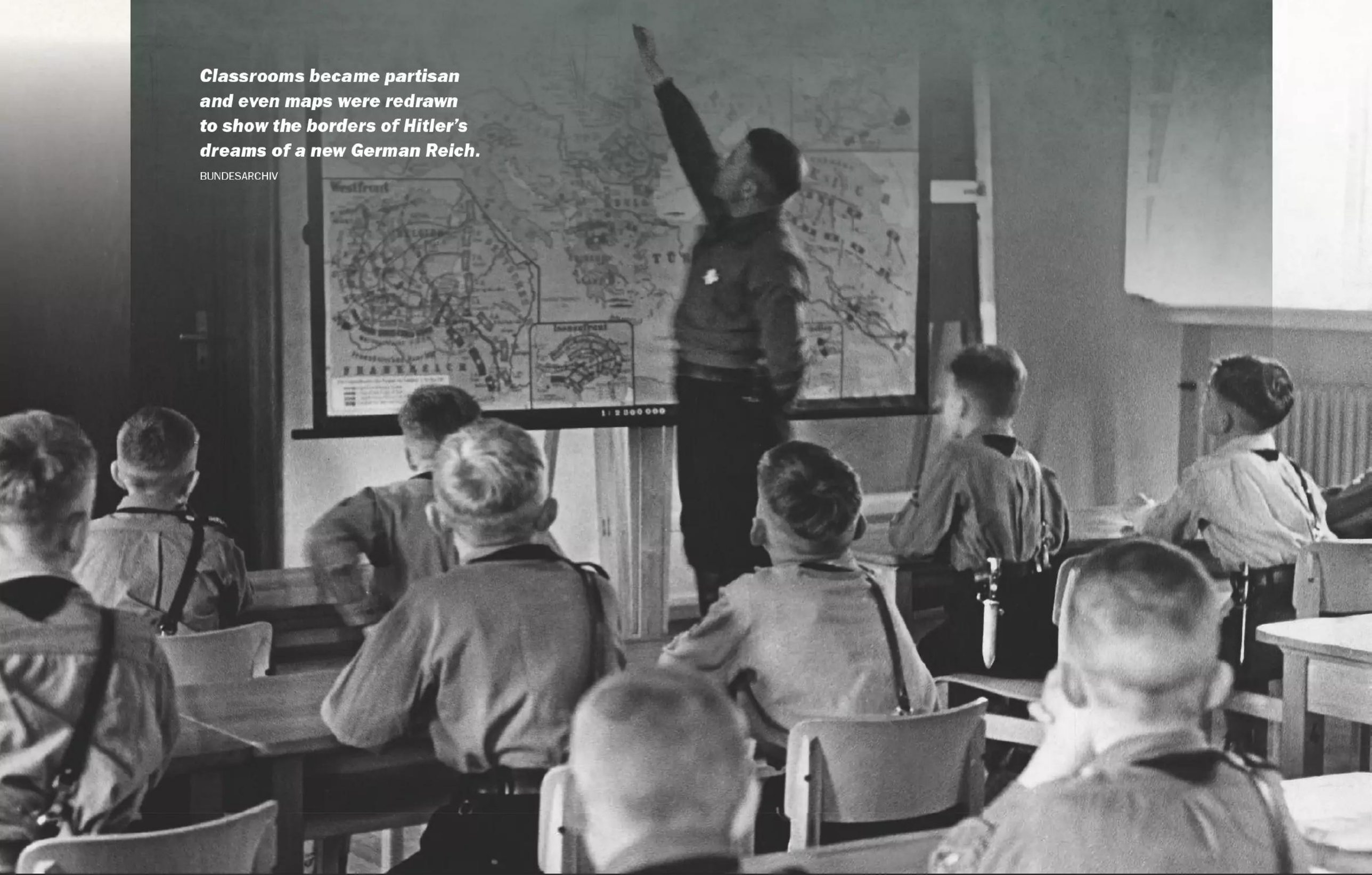
Biology and racial theory were carefully laid out in a guide titled *Heredity and Racial Science for Elementary and Secondary Schools.* It advised teachers on how to incorporate Nazi ideology into science lessons. History was used to hammer home the superiority of the Aryan race. Teachers were instructed to explain the fall of Rome as the result of racial mixing – with the people of Carthage, for instance, the enterprising trading city that once flourished on Tunisia's Mediterranean coast. According to »

Staffroom was purged

Hitler's regime demanded absolute obedience and allegiance from its extended arm in the classroom. Any teacher who criticised or deviated from Nazi ideals was promptly banned from teaching.

The Nazis had barely taken over the government offices in 1933 before the purges of the country's schools began. From then on, only teachers with the correct political, religious and racial background were allowed to teach Germany's children. In the same year, the government introduced a law that made it possible to dismiss teachers who were deemed politically unreliable. The law targeted political opponents of the regime as well as Jews and other so-called undesirables, who were sacked in large numbers. Those Jews who managed to remain in office at schools and universities despite the law were dismissed following new regulations passed in November and December 1935 that prohibited Jews from holding public office. Social democrats and liberal-minded people were also dismissed. Those teachers who weren't fired were forced to swear personal loyalty to Hitler and pressurised to join the only union allowed now, the *Nationalsozialistischer Lehrerbund,* the Nazi teachers' union. Figures show that in 1938, 97 per cent of German teachers were members of the pro-regime union.

Even with a clean party record and membership of the Nazi trade union, teachers weren't safe. Students were encouraged to report any teacher who dared to criticise Hitler or the regime. The purges also affected universities, including several Nobel laureates, who in the early decades of the 20th century helped Germany gain a reputation as one of the world's leading countries in science.



Classrooms became partisan and even maps were redrawn to show the borders of Hitler's dreams of a new German Reich.
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» Nazi textbooks, the Romans became physically and mentally sick, which led to Rome being conquered by racially strong Germanic tribes from the north.

History lessons also focused on Germany's past glories and portrayed Jews and Marxists as the reason for defeat in World War I and the humiliation of the Treaty of Versailles. In geography, pupils learned about the lands lost in 1919 and the need to regain them and secure *Lebensraum* (living space) in the East. Physics and chemistry lessons included topics such as shooting, ballistics, aeronautics, bridge-building and the effects of poison gas. Even mathematics was laced with war propaganda. Pupils solved problems such as:

"A bomber aircraft on take-off carries 12 dozen bombs, each weighing ten kilos. The aircraft takes off for Warsaw, international centre of Jews. It bombs the town. On take-off with all bombs on board, and a fuel tank containing 1,000 kilos of fuel, the aircraft weighed about 8 tons. When it returns from the crusade, there are still 230 kilos of fuel left. What is the weight of the aircraft when empty?"

Hitler became every child's role model

Teachers fostered admiration for Hitler alongside traditional subjects. His portrait hung in every classroom, and textbooks described children's joy at meeting him. Hitler was presented as one of them – a hero whose greatness couldn't quite be reached but who served as a guiding light, especially for boys. One book said that Hitler, as a boy, loved stories of courage and heroism, and was glad that he "was a boy and could also become a soldier one day".

Hitler was not only a role model for the students, but also for the teachers, who from 1934 had to swear personal allegiance to the Führer. At the same time, they were instructed to avoid discussions and conversations with the class. The teacher's task was to teach and point out the truth, just as Hitler did to the Germans. The change was reflected in language. With the Nazis' rise to power, the job title *Lehrer* was changed to *Erzieher,* another word for teacher, but with overtones that suggested a much more disciplined and one-sided approach.

In their new role, teachers regularly tried to get pupils to report on their parents' attitudes, for example by asking them to write an essay on "What does your family talk about at home?" Some children were even promised a reward if they revealed what their parents had said about the regime. Teachers also reassured children that they could safely report their parents. They were told that their true father was actually the Führer, and that by following him, they would become the heroes of tomorrow.

Despite their authoritarian status, teachers themselves were constantly under the supervision and control of the authorities. Successful indoctrination required a loyal teaching staff, and any hint of insubordination was dealt with harshly. For ambitious teachers who wanted not only to survive but also to be promoted, it was necessary to appease »

Bernhard Rust

Born: 30th September 1883 · Died: 8th May 1945

Rust was a Nazi official who served as minister of science, education and culture from 1934 to 1945. It was in this role that he introduced Nazi ideology to the classroom. Rust committed suicide in May 1945 when the war was lost.

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Hitlerjugend

trained boys as Nazi fighting machines

In order to achieve his goal of rebuilding Germany, Hitler made every effort to turn boys into strong, obedient men. In the Hitler Youth, boys as young as six years old were taught to live – and die – for their leader and country.

The *Hitlerjugend*, or Hitler Youth, began in the 1920s as a small, insignificant youth organisation, just one of many. However, the Nazis quickly realised the potential to indoctrinate young people into the Nazi way of thinking through the Hitler Youth.

Over the next few years, through a series of charismatic leaders, the Nazis streamlined the movement into a de facto training programme for churning out future soldiers and creating race-conscious model citizens. Peer and party pressure, and not least the desire to be part of a larger community, led millions of children and young people to join the Nazi youth movement in the 1930s.

By 1939, when membership was made compulsory, almost four million of the country's 8.8 million boys and girls aged ten to 18 were members of the Hitler Youth.

MAIN SUBJECTS

Weaponry

The boys were taught how to use rifles and crawl under barbed wire over long distances. They could also enrol in the special military youth corps.

Field training

By participating in camps and hikes, the boys were prepared for life in the field. They were often put to the test, by jumping from a great height, for instance.

Sport and PE

Physical exercise was designed to make boys strong and combat-ready. Special attention was paid to boxing, a sport that interested Hitler personally.

THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT LEADERS

SHUTTERSTOCK

Kurt Gruber (1904-1943)

– was the first leader of the Hitler Youth, which he formed by bringing together a number of smaller Nazi youth organisations in 1926. He led the organisation until 1931, when he left the post to take a position in the Nazi Party's propaganda department. Kurt Gruber died of a stroke in Dresden in 1943.

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Baldur von Schirach (1907-1974)

– was supreme leader of the Hitler Youth from 1931 to 1940, and turned the organisation into an efficient brainwashing machine. In 1940, von Schirach left his post as head of the Hitler Youth to become Gauleiter in Vienna, where he deported 65,000 Jews to the death camps in Poland.

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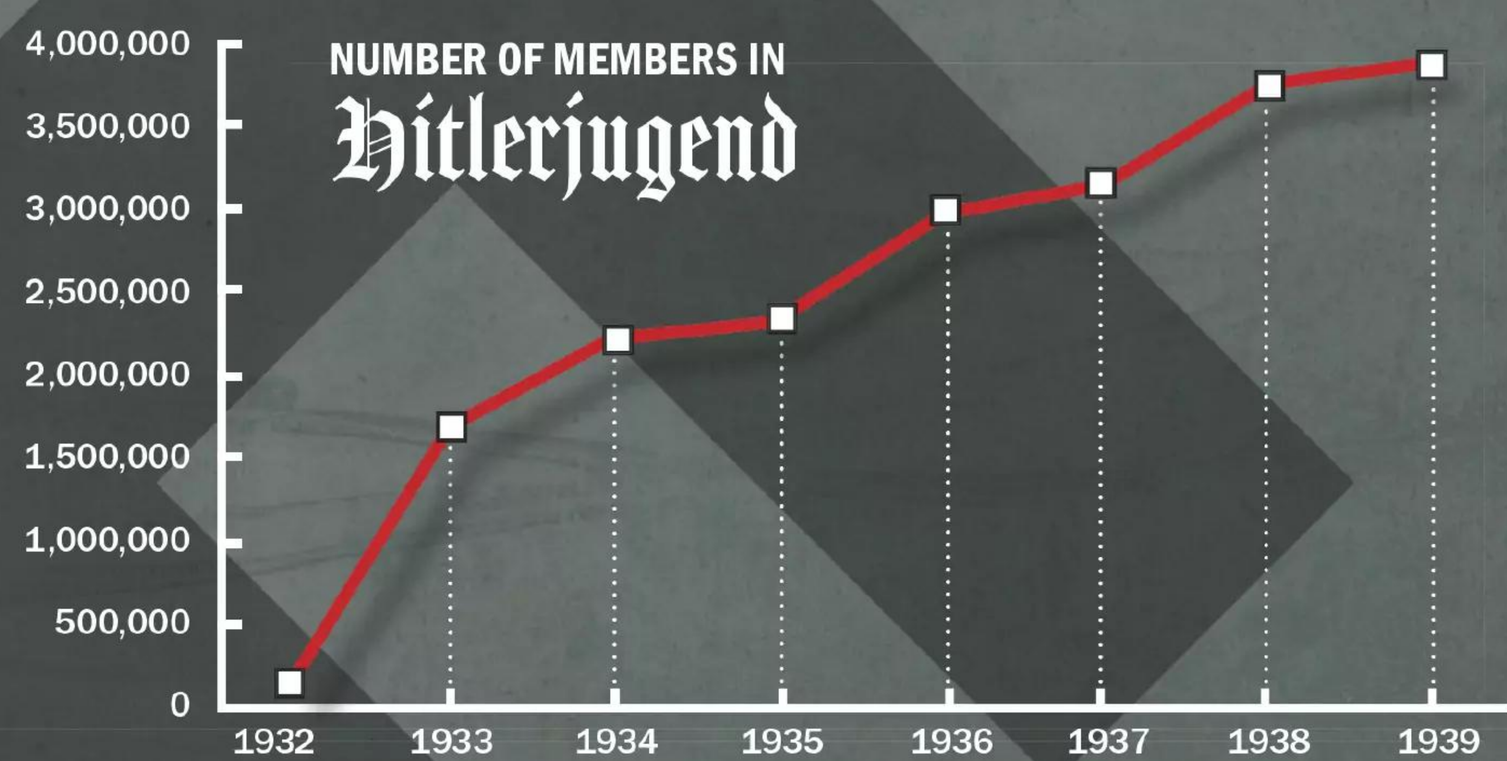
Artur Axmann (1913-1996)

– joined the Hitler Youth at the age of 12 and quickly rose through the ranks. In 1940, he succeeded von Schirach as supreme leader. Axmann is best remembered as the founder of the 12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend, a division of very young boys who fought against the Allied landing forces on D-Day.



HIERARCHY

6-10 years old: Pimpf

The boy was given a pedigree book. In it, the leaders recorded information about the boy's physical and political progress.

10-14 years old: Jungvolk

When a boy joined the Jungvolk, he had to swear an oath on the Führer's birthday that he was willing to sacrifice his life for Hitler.

14-18 years old: Hitlerjugend

Upon joining the Hitler Youth, the boy became part of an organisation that was structured like the German army.

As many as 80 per cent of German youngsters were members of the Nazi youth organisations at the outbreak of war.

GETTY IMAGES

» the regime in every conceivable way. Teachers therefore competed to show their enthusiasm for Hitler by getting the children to write letters and greetings. The letters, sent at Christmas and on Hitler's birthday, were often accompanied by homemade gifts, a gesture intended to make the children see Hitler as part of their family.

They also set a grim example by showing hostility toward Jewish pupils. Emma Hubert from Kronheim, Bavaria, learned this the hard way. When she and her brother were beaten up on their way to school and she sought help from her teacher, the reply was: "Well, what did you expect, you dirty Jew?"

Emma's story and numerous other accounts show the lengths to which teachers would go to ingratiate themselves with the Nazis. And there is some evidence that, for a large proportion of teachers, Hitler-worship was based on genuine conviction. In any case, statistics show that a higher proportion of teachers joined the Nazi Party compared to the general population during the years after Hitler came to power. In fact, in the years before World War II, they joined the party at twice the rate as the rest of the population.

Primary school teachers and younger faculty members at universities were particularly eager. For both groups, more than 25 per cent of their members in the teachers' union, the National Socialist Teachers League, voluntarily joined the Nazi Party immediately after Hitler came to power. Historians believe that the teachers' political choices were largely due to the profession's significant decline in both pay and prestige in the years leading up to Hitler's rise to power.

Children played with military-themed toys

Eventually, National Socialism infiltrated every part of children's lives – even playtime. Boys played with wooden Hitler figures, military-themed jigsaw puzzles, and board games simulating warfare on land, sea and air. The luckiest boys owned model

Even weapons training was on the school timetable. At school – and especially in the Hitler Youth – boys could learn how to operate a machine gun or calculate the trajectory of an artillery shell.
BUNDESARCHIV

U-boats or sleek Luftwaffe fighter planes. Girls weren't forgotten either. Toy makers offered a blonde, blue-eyed boy doll in SA uniform and even cookie cutters shaped like swastikas.

However, the most intense indoctrination happened in the *Hitlerjugend* – or Hitler Youth, the Nazi youth organisation. It was founded in 1922 when the young Nazi Party published a call for "National Socialist youth ... aged between 14 and 18" to fight the "Jewish enemy". Membership was free, and the only requirements were "love of one's country and people, enjoyment of honest open combat and of healthy physical activity, the veneration of ethical and spiritual values, and the rejection of those values originating from Jewry".

At first, the movement was just one among many in interwar Germany. Outdoor activities such as hiking and camping had been popular since the late 19th century, and the Boy Scout movement – founded by British officer Robert Baden-Powell – was particularly beloved by boys. By 1909, German boys were already joining troops and participating in the larger German youth movement, *Die Deutsche Jugendbewegung.*

That all changed when the Hitler Youth was taken over in 1931 by Baldur von Schirach, an ambitious nobleman who, through party work and family connections, had gained access to Hitler's inner circle. As *Reichsjugendführer* – Reich Youth Leader – von Schirach began to mix the scout movement's outdoor life with the hard-hitting ideology of Nazism.

The result was an organisation that transformed lively and playful German children and young people into well-trained, obedient and combat-ready subjects, both practically, politically and mentally.

Youth oath was sworn on Hitler's birthday

Just as in school, indoctrination in the Hitler Youth began when the children were very young. Boys as young as six could be admitted as a *Pimpf* (little fellow). When the boys turned ten, they could, if they passed a test, join the part of the Hitler Youth called *Jungvolk.* The initiation took place in solemn ceremonies when the boy swore an oath on Hitler's birthday to obey the Führer, even if it cost him his life.

After this, the training truly began. At least once a week, the children and youths gathered together. The meetings could be held anywhere a room was available, such as in disused factories, barns or the back room of a shop. There, the group listened to lectures and speeches about Hitler's achievements, the history of the Nazi movement, or Germany's greatness. The meeting also included singing and music. The Hitler Youth even had its own songbook filled with patriotic ballads about battle and noble death for the Fatherland.

Weapons exercises, such as rifle shooting, were also part of the training, and boys who showed talent as marksmen were encouraged to make a special effort in this discipline.

Hiking and camping trips were a regular feature. On these expeditions, the boys practised pitching tents, reading maps and navigating by the stars – skills that could prove useful in war, and for many the trips were pure adventure. This was especially true for working-class boys, most of whom had never been on holiday before. With the Hitler Youth, these experiences cost only a small fee or, in some cases, nothing at all. The equal treatment gave the boys a sense of being part of a community »

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Schoolbooks *now taught children how to recognise dangerous Jews by the size of their noses, among other things...*

Maths lessons *included calculating how many hours a man would have to work to pay for the places of unwanted disabled people in hospitals...*

In biology, *the story of the poisonous Jewish mushroom became popular as a way to learn about racial purity...*

Art classes *could be spent drawing Jews – preferably depicting them stealing or tricking innocent people.*

» not defined by class or wealth, but open to all good Germans. The feeling of equality and unity was emphasised by the fact that boys in the Hitler Youth were allowed to address even the highest-ranking leaders using the informal *du* (you), a freedom quite unheard of at a time when even parents were often addressed with the formal *Sie*.

However, the youngsters were always reminded to address their direct superior with their rank – a rule meant to teach children that military structures and honours were the only distinctions that mattered in the Nazi state.

"I must die for Hitler"

The Hitler Youth movement was not all about war. In the girls' section, the League of German Girls *(Bund Deutscher Mädel),* girls and young women were trained for roles as wives and mothers. At meetings and so-called home evenings, the youths were taught cooking, sewing and mending clothes. They were also instructed in childcare and practised changing nappies on a doll. However, the girls were not spared political indoctrination.

Besides instruction in racial theory and basic knowledge of Germany's political goals, the girls were taught racial hygiene, a discipline designed to enable them to choose the most suitable man as the father of their children.

For both girls and boys, Baldur von Schirach's Nazi youth organisations were a magnet. In January 1933, when Hitler took power, the movement had 100,000 members. By the end of the year, the number had risen to two million. Four years later – in 1937 – 5.4 million German boys and girls were members of the movement. Around this time, Alfons Heck, who mourned the expulsion of his Jewish friend in his first year at school, joined the *Jungvolk.* For him, as for most other members of the movement, the dream was to see Hitler at one of the major party rallies. For Heck, the dream came true in 1938 when he heard Hitler speak at the party congress, the *Reichsparteitage,* in Nuremberg. When Hitler addressed the youths with promises that one day they would rule the world, he felt that the Führer was speaking directly to him.

"We shouted at the top of our lungs, with tears streaming down our faces: *'Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil!'* From that moment on, I belonged to Adolf Hitler body and soul," Heck later recounted.

The extent of children's self-sacrifice due to brainwashing was witnessed by the headmaster of the American school in Berlin, Gregor Ziemer, when a German doctor friend took him on a house visit to a working-class family. The patient was a young boy suffering from pneumonia, a disease he had contracted during a march before joining the Hitler Youth *Jungvolk*.

In the 1930s, before doctors had effective means to combat infections, pneumonia was a serious and life-threatening illness. The sick boy was ghostly pale and weak, and clearly delirious with fever when the doctor grasped his wrist to take his pulse. The boy instinctively pulled his hand away and raised his arm in the air.

"Heil Hitler," he shouted in a loud, unnatural voice.

"His father is a storm trooper. He said the boy had to go. He did not want a weakling for a son," his mother explained with tears in her eyes.

"His father says if he dies, then he dies for Hitler," she added, sobbing to Gregor Ziemer. Shocked, Ziemer watched the »

Exercise was on timetable

Where German schoolchildren used to memorise poems and mathematical formulae, marches, strength tests and endless practice at acrobatic gymnastics now played a crucial role in schools.

Before the Nazis came to power, German schools were known for demanding high academic standards in history, maths and culture. All that changed under Nazism. With Hitler at the helm, strength, exercise and physical health were put at the top of the agenda. The aim was to create healthy, strong children who could later be soldiers and labourers, if boys, and wives and mothers, if girls.

"Physical education is alone worthy of the Nazi teacher's attention. All else can be dismissed as non-essential," wrote American school principal Gregor Ziemer in 1941, summing up the German Ministry of Education's attitude.

Gymnastics, along with German, became the most important school subject and one of only three compulsory subjects for boys in high school. Particular emphasis was placed on acrobatic gymnastics, which trained the individual to see himself as part of a greater whole. Nazi youth organisations were even more concerned with physical training. This was especially true of the Hitler Youth, the organisation for boys. Even the *Pimpf,* boys between the ages of six and ten, were sent on marches of up to 80 kilometres.

German youth was no stranger to long walks. As early as the end of the 19th century, young people had gathered together in the *Wandervogel* movement, a neo-romantic, back-to-nature walking organisation that emerged as a reaction to the nationalisation of Germany. The movement was banned by the Nazis in 1933 and its members were absorbed into organisations such as the Hitler Youth and the *Bund Deutscher Mädel.*

The physical demands became tougher and tougher with age, and marches of up to 80 km with 15 kg in a rucksack became commonplace.
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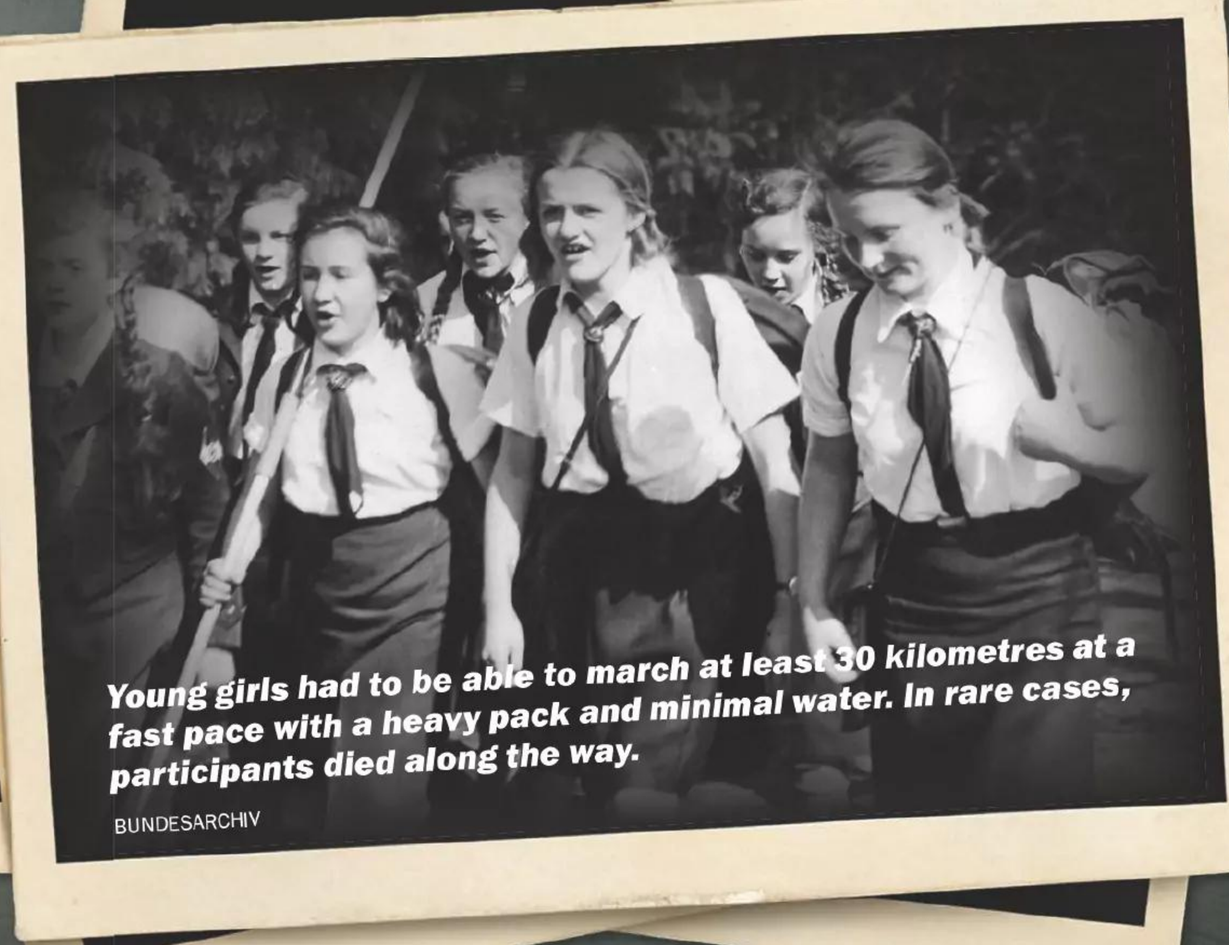

Young girls had to be able to march at least 30 kilometres at a fast pace with a heavy pack and minimal water. In rare cases, participants died along the way.
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Bund Deutscher Mädel

turned girls into perfect housewives

For German girls, a glorious life awaited as wives and mothers to the future soldiers of Nazi Germany. The task of preparing the girls for an adulthood spent in the service of the state – and men – fell to the *Bund Deutscher Mädel,* the Nazi youth movement for girls. Here, girls learned to knit, sew and cook – and to sacrifice everything for their husband and for Germany.

Boys played a key role in the Third Reich as future soldiers. But without women to bear children and look after the home, Hitler's grandiose dreams couldn't be realised and sustained. Therefore, as early as 1929, the Nazi Party established an organisation for girls and young women. The organisation was called the *Bund Deutscher Mädel,* the Federation of Young German Girls, which was the equivalent of the Hitler Youth for boys.

Here, the girls were not trained in the art of war, but in the noble female virtues that would transform young girls into perfect wives and mothers. Like the boys, the girls were instilled with the ideology and world view of Nazism through songs, education and practical work.

Membership of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* grew steadily throughout the 1930s, and by the time membership was made compulsory in 1939, the organisation included more than three million of Germany's 8.8 million boys and girls.

As the war cost more and more men their lives, girls were also trained to help on the battlefield as nurses.

MAIN SUBJECTS

Ideology and racial hygiene

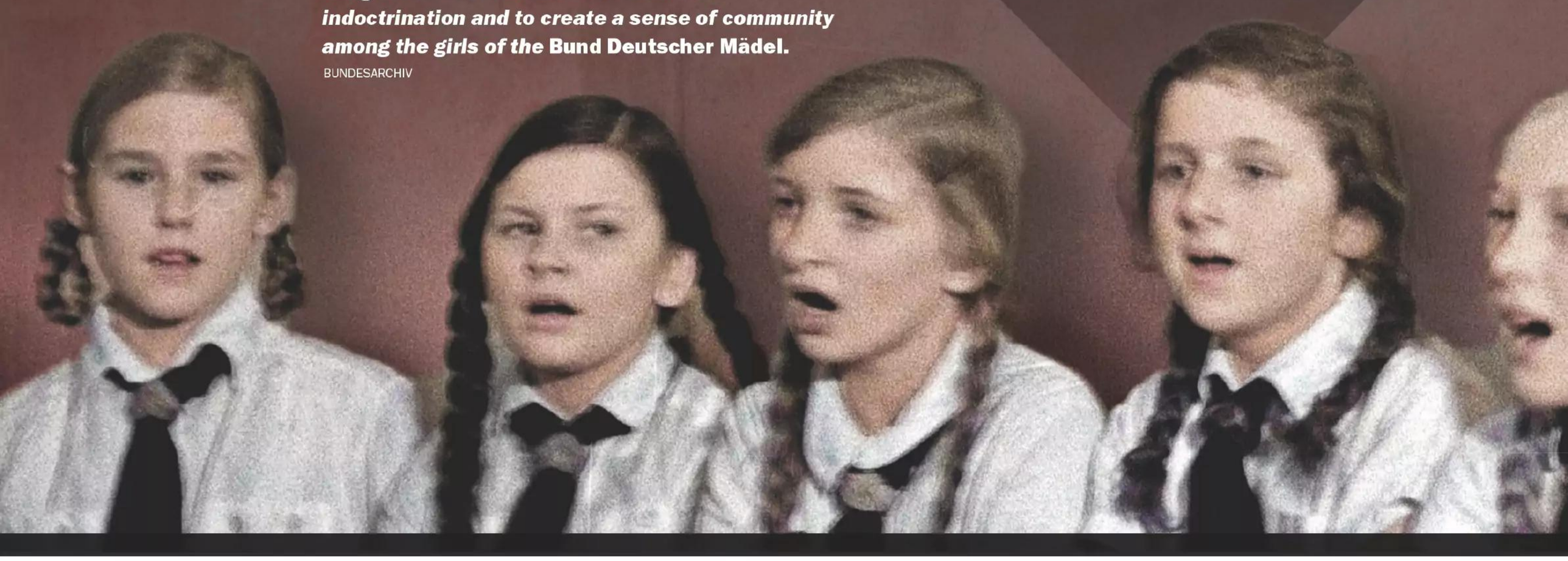
Girls were taught the basic ideology of Nazism. The teaching of racial hygiene aimed to enable the girls to later choose pure-bred husbands.

Home economics, handicrafts, cookery

The lessons prepared the girls for their future lives as wives and mothers, roles that, according to the Nazis, were a woman's true calling.

Gymnastics

The exercises were designed to help girls stay healthy and strong. Classes focused on acrobatic gymnastics, which trained the girls' ability to work together.



***Songs of the Fatherland were used for indoctrination and to create a sense of community among the girls of the* Bund Deutscher Mädel.**
BUNDESARCHIV

THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT LEADERS

BUNDESARCHIV

Trude Mohr (1902-1989)

– joined the Nazi Party in 1928 and in 1930 was appointed to establish a branch of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel,* a new part of the Hitler Youth for girls, in the Brandenburg district. Mohr's branch quickly grew to become the largest in the country, and in 1934 she became the organisation's first overall leader.

BUNDESARCHIV

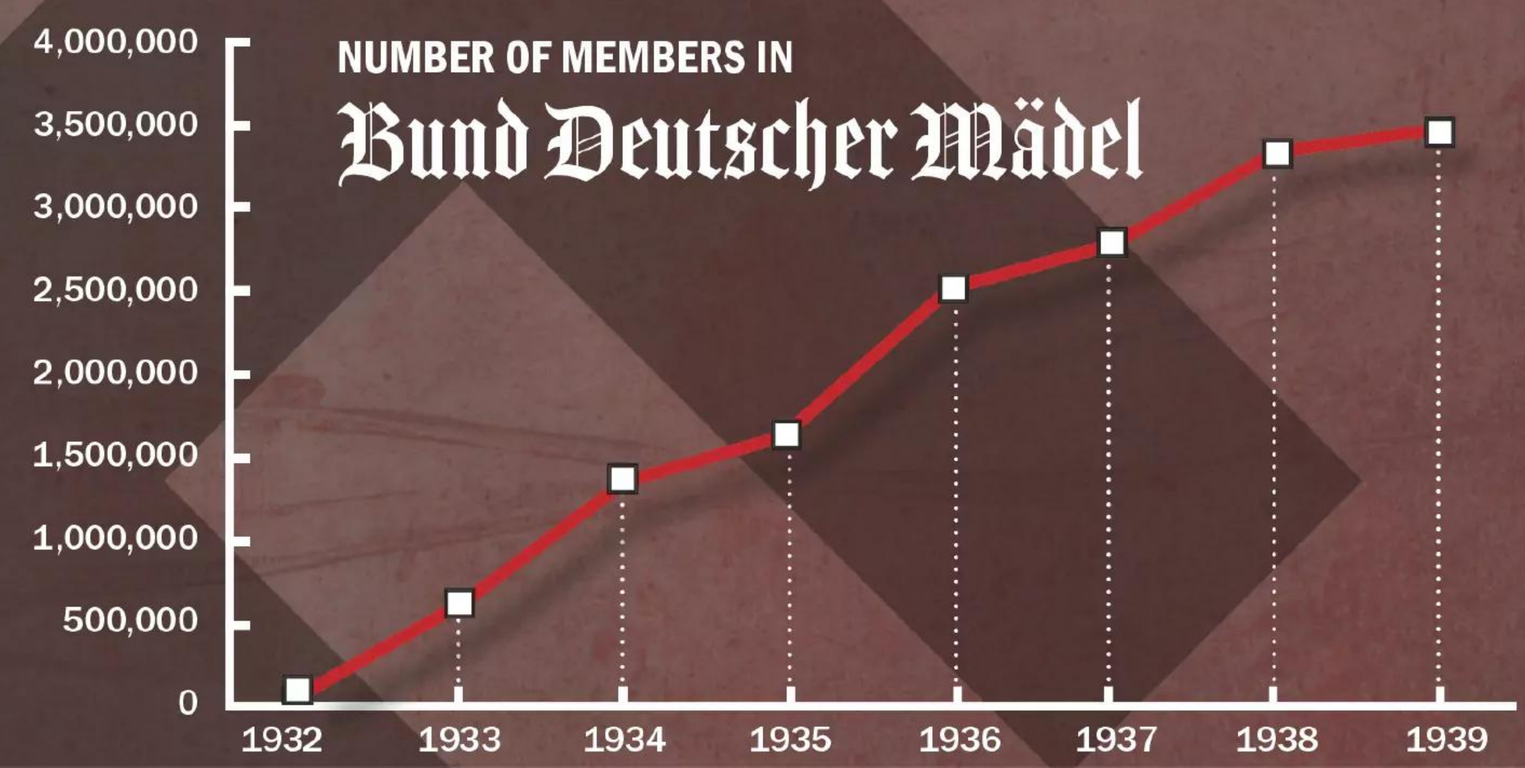
Jutta Rüdiger (1910-2001)

– trained as a psychologist and during her studies was an active member of the Nazi student association *Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund.* In 1933 she joined the *Bund Deutscher Mädel.* When Trude Mohr resigned from the role, Rüdiger took over the position as the organisation's top leader.

BUNDESARCHIV

Clementine Rüdenhausen (1912-2008)

– joined the Nazi Party in 1933. That same year, she became the leader of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* in Lower Franconia, Bavaria. Four years later, she was tasked with building the *Glaube und Schönheit,* a subdivision of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* for young women aged 17 to 21.



HIERARCHY

10-14 years old: Jungmädelbund

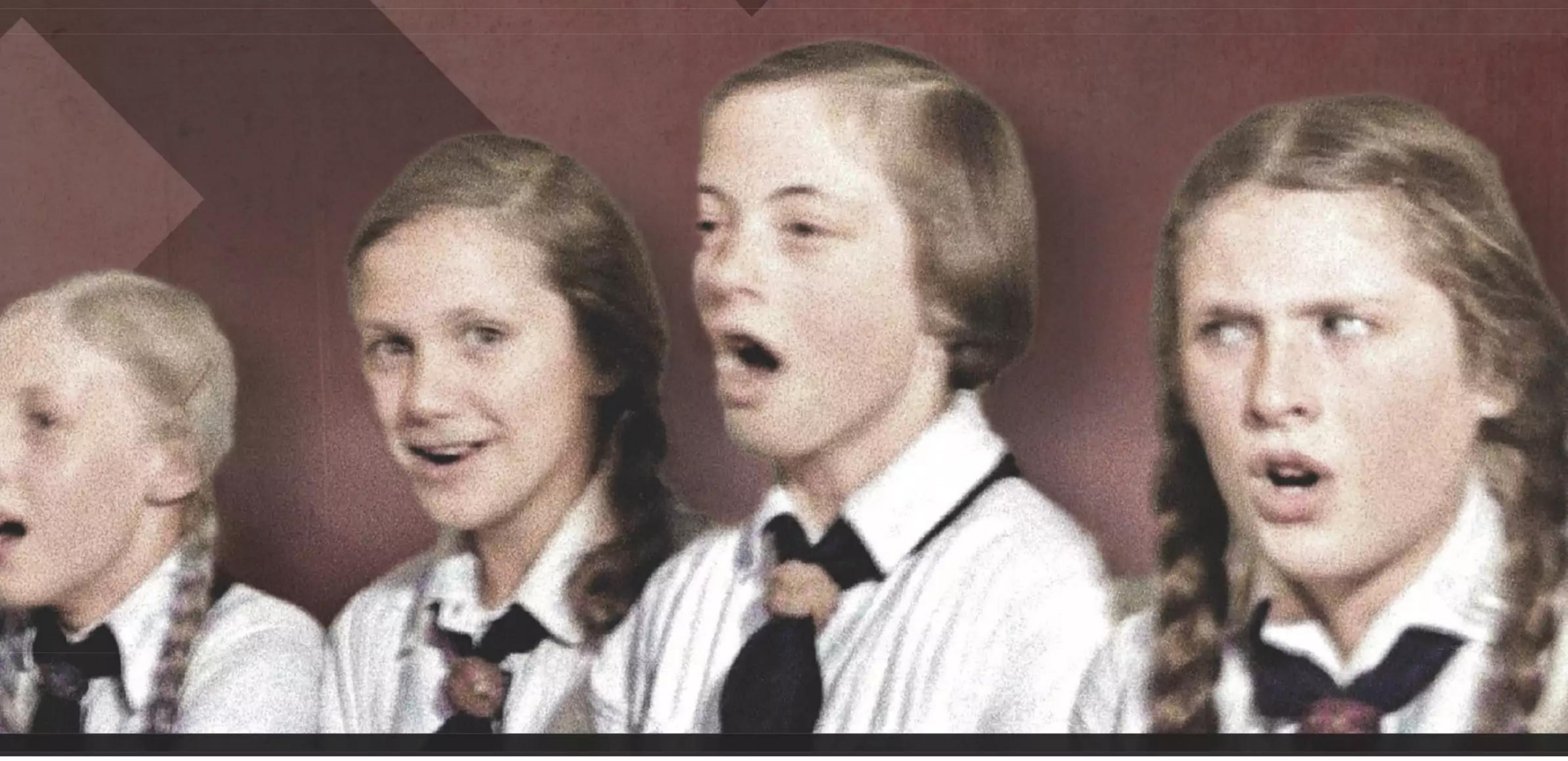
Also called *Kükengruppe* (chick group), this was a subdivision for the youngest girls under the youth department.

14-18: Bund Deutscher Mädel

Here the girls learned to cook and sew, and received ideological lessons on racial purity and how to be a good mother.

18-21: Glaube und Schönheit

The focus here was on culture and preparation for marriage and supporting the war as secretaries or nurses.



Catching a glimpse of Hitler became the greatest dream of German children. Both boys and girls saw the Nazi leader as the saviour of the nation.
BUNDESARCHIV

» bizarre scene unfold in the boy's sickroom: "His pinched face wore the expression of a Christian martyr dying for the Saviour. His right hand was straight up now, stiff and unyielding. His lips kept forming the words his burning soul prompted him to utter: 'I must die for Hitler.'"

The chanting continued until the doctor managed to give the patient a sedative, which made him calm down. The boy survived. A more tragic fate befell a girl from the League of German Girls whom Ziemer once had to drive to hospital. During a car journey, Ziemer spotted the girl lying by the roadside near Großbeeren, just south of Berlin.

Her companions were bent over her, and a leader explained that the girl was suffering severe stomach pains. The leader asked Ziemer to take her to hospital in Berlin. Lying in the back seat, the girl explained she had endured severe pain all day but did not want to be *"zimperlich"* – soft – and stay at home. Besides, her father had told her to forget her "little stomach ache" and toughen herself up for the Führer.

An hour after arriving at the hospital, the girl died of a burst appendix. When Gregor Ziemer called the girl's home to deliver the sad news, he received a chilling response from her aunt.

"She thanked me for what I had done, but suggested that I need not bother the parents. They would get over it. Anyway, the girl had died in uniform – like a real soldier – for the Führer," Ziemer reported, shocked.

Children were to put out fires in the cities

By then, Germany had long passed a decisive turning point and was steadily moving towards war, so the Hitler Youth intensified its training. Boys were now taught how to crawl quickly across terrain under heavy fire, and the youth organisations were regularly visited by senior officers who told the young boys about the exciting life at the front and the fantastic and probably invincible weapons with which Hitler was equipping the military. From 1937, the regime allowed youths to receive proper military training in the armed forces.

As war approached, the Nazi state tightened its grip on the younger generation and placed all young people's organisations under the Hitler Youth. The following year, Baldur von Schirach ensured that all boys born in a certain year were automatically enrolled in the organisation. At the same time, the regime pressured school principals to force pupils to volunteer. And half a year before the outbreak of war – in March 1939 – membership of the Hitler Youth was finally made compulsory. By then, the organisation had nearly seven million members, and more kept joining.

Six months later, the situation became serious. On 1st September 1939, Germany went to war, and when Allied planes bombed Berlin the following year, members of the Hitler Youth were ordered to help put out fires, assist the postal service, and operate anti-aircraft guns. As the war progressed and German casualties increased, the youths were conscripted for actual combat service.

During the war's final years, Hitler Youth boys as young as 12 fought in some of the hardest battles of World War II, such as the defence of Normandy after the Allied D-Day landings, and as part of the *Volkssturm* (People's Storm) in Berlin in spring 1945, when the Soviets captured the German capital. Historians do not

know how many youths died, but they estimate that around two million German teenagers lost their lives during the six years the war raged on the Eastern and Western Fronts.

Among the survivors was Alfons Heck. He served in the Luftwaffe during the war, an effort that earned him the Iron Cross. At the end of the war, he was only 17, still believing in the Führer and Fatherland. He flatly rejected Allied accounts of war crimes. When shown footage from concentration camps, he angrily claimed the Allies had faked the films.

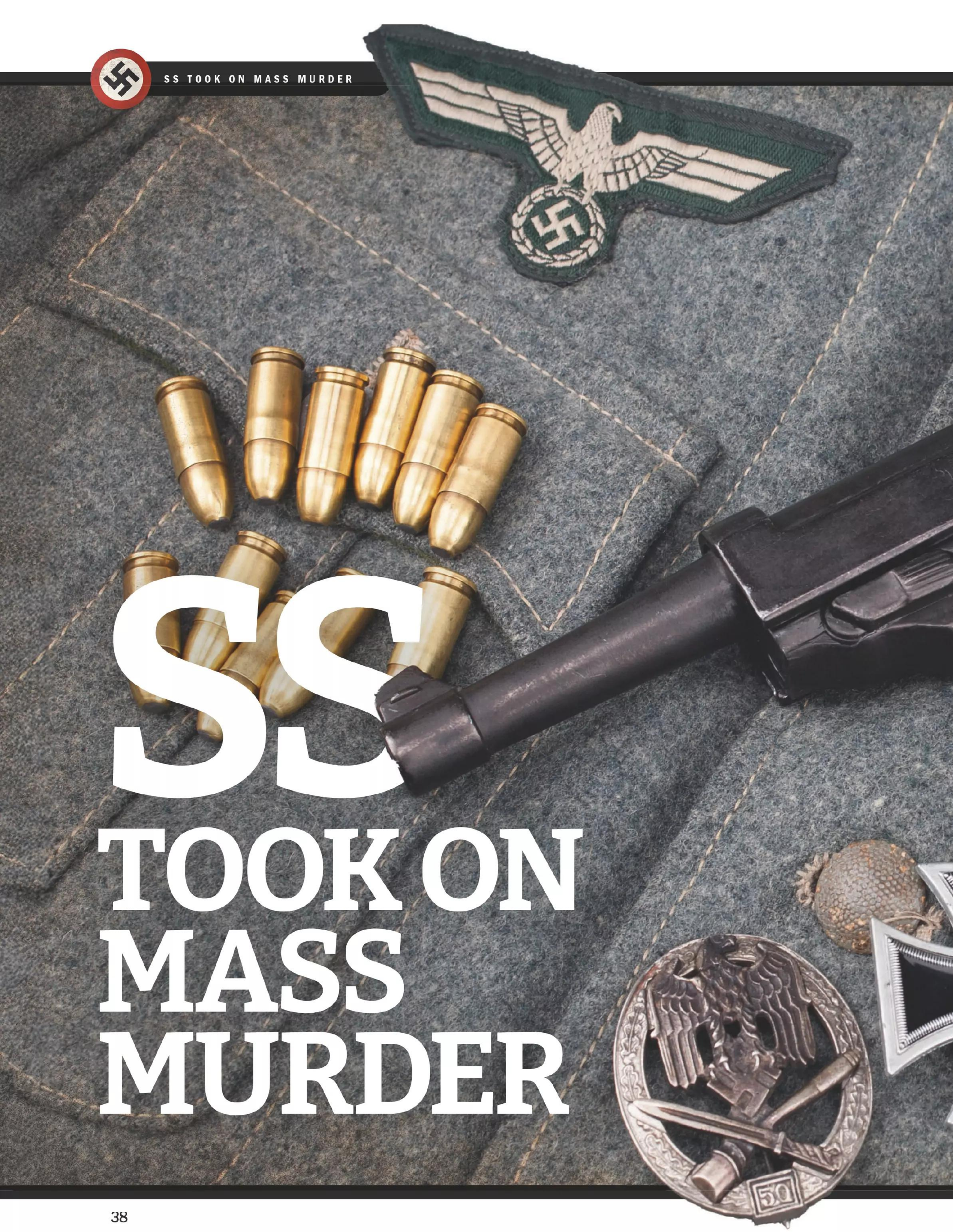
Only many years later did he acknowledge his guilt. He also understood where the unwavering faith in Nazism that led to these terrible acts came from.

"The experience of the Hitler Youth in Nazi Germany constitutes a massive case of child abuse. Out of millions of basically innocent children, Hitler and his regime succeeded in creating potential monsters," Heck declared after the war. □

DID YOU KNOW

...that children as young as ten years old were taught how to throw hand grenades at the Nazi elite schools known as Napola?

Among other things, German children had to serve in labour corps at weekends and holidays. Here they learned to work hard to build a new, strong Germany.
BUNDESARCHIV



SS TOOK ON MASS MURDER

The SS began as Hitler's personal bodyguards. The corps was responsible for the war's most horrific atrocities.
SHUTTERSTOCK

In Germany, SS soldiers were revered as the purest, most racially 'perfect' Aryans – and entry requirements were brutally strict. In the occupied territories, the corps was tasked with exterminating millions of Jews and other enemies of Nazism – a duty its soldiers carried out with equal parts Nazi pride and chilling efficiency.

The SS was blooded in Eastern Europe, where it began the Holocaust by massacring Jews with rifles and pistols.
GETTY IMAGES

When SS officer Kurt Gerstein visited the extermination camp Bełzec in occupied Poland in August 1942, he witnessed first-hand how his colleagues in the SS had turned the mass murder of Jews into a fully organised process. The industrial killing machine ran smoothly: immediately after the Jewish children and adults arrived at the camp, uniformed SS men ordered them to remove all their clothing, including glasses and prosthetics.

At a counter, the Jews were made to hand over money and valuables, after which SS guards – wielding snapping riding whips – drove the terrified people towards the gas chambers. Silently, they filed past Gerstein, who later recounted the mass gassing:

"[T]hey all walk along the avenue, all naked, men, women, children, without prostheses ... A strong SS man stands on the corner who says to those poor souls in a pastoral voice: nothing is going to happen to you! You just have to inhale deeply in the chambers, it will open your lungs, you need to inhale this because of all the illnesses and diseases," Gerstein recounted.

"[They] take the few steps to the chambers without resisting in any way – the majority knows, the smell tells them of their fate! – And so they climb up the small set of stairs and then they see everything. Mothers with children held to their breasts, small naked children, adults, men and women, all naked – they hesitate, but they walk into the death chambers, either pushed forward by those behind them or driven by the leather whips of the SS."

According to Gerstein, it took 32 minutes before everyone was dead. And when the doors to the gas chambers were opened again, the corpses stood upright, packed tightly together – the space was so cramped. Then the dentists took over. Using iron hooks, they prised open the mouths of the dead, and with hammers, they knocked out gold teeth, bridges and crowns from their jaws. Finally, the naked bodies were tossed into enormous mass graves.

Half a million perpetrators were behind the atrocities

The horrors that Gerstein witnessed were the fate of Jews across Europe between 1941 and 1945. In total, the Nazis' genocide claimed the lives of around six million Jews, of whom approximately four million were murdered in death and extermination camps like the one at Bełzec. Behind the genocide stood some 500,000 people – half a million perpetrators who each served as a cog in the murder machine. Some – the Führer and others at the top of the Nazi hierarchy – made the decisions about the killings, others handled the administration, such as planning deportations or ordering gas, and finally, there were those who carried out the murders in the Nazis' death factories.

The group responsible for running the concentration camps and carrying out the Holocaust was the SS, short for *Schutzstaffel*, protection squad. In 1939, the Nazi organisation was given the task of solving "the Jewish question", *die Endlösung* – the Final Solution – but as its name suggests, the corps had originally been created for an entirely different purpose. While Adolf Hitler was behind bars in Landsberg Prison following his failed attempt to seize power in the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, he began to fear that the Nazi thugs of the *Sturmabteilung* (Storm Division, or SA for short) might one day pose a threat to his authority.

The violent stormtroopers had been brutally effective in protecting Nazi Party meetings and terrorising political opponents. While Hitler was imprisoned, the number of brownshirts had exploded: within a short time, the SA corps had grown from 2,000 to 30,000 men. And while Hitler was impressed by this progress, he also feared that the brutal brawlers – or the »

BUNDESARCHIV

SS leader Reinhard Heydrich was considered the perfect Aryan and was – between orchestrating atrocities – featured in Nazi propaganda multiple times.

Only Aryans were welcome in the SS

Applicants to the SS faced strict criteria. Only the racially 'best' Germans could harbour hopes of joining the elite corps.

Admission requirements varied depending on the period and the branch of the SS being applied to. In the early years, entry was extremely selective. But due to heavy wartime losses, the corps gradually relaxed its standards and its principle of volunteer service. As a result, the SS mutated from an elite force into a mass army. Where recruits had once needed to be 100 per cent flawless, now even dental issues, poor eyesight, flat feet and mild varicose veins were often overlooked.

ϟϟ Admission requirements ϟϟ

GENEALOGY

Applicants had to present a detailed ancestry certificate (*Ariernachweis*) proving pure "Aryan" lineage back to at least 1750. If any "non-Aryan" ancestors appeared in the family tree, the candidate was rejected.

AGE

Candidates had to be aged between 18 and 23. However, older candidates with special qualifications could be considered. In 1942, Hitler authorised the SS to accept volunteers aged 17, even without parental consent.

PHYSIQUE

Applicants had to be at least 1.70 metres tall, athletically built, with good hearing and eyesight (glasses were not permitted). Blond hair and blue eyes were preferred, based on Nazi racial theory – though not strictly required.

MEDICAL EXAMINATION

All SS applicants underwent a thorough medical exam. If doctors found a defect – for instance, a tendency towards varicose veins – the candidate was rejected.

OATH OF LOYALTY

All SS men swore personal loyalty and unconditional obedience to Adolf Hitler – not to his office. The oath read:

> "I swear to you, Adolf Hitler – Führer and Chancellor of the German Reich – loyalty and bravery. I promise to obey you and the leaders you appoint, unto death. May God help me."

» "suspect mass" as he dubbed them – might turn against him on his release, when he resumed his fight to seize power.

"When I came out of Landsberg, everything was broken up and scattered in sometimes rival bands. I told myself then I needed a bodyguard … made up of men who would be enlisted without restriction, even to march against their own brothers. Only 20 men to a city (on condition that one could count on them absolutely)," said Hitler, who viewed the SA as a bunch of thugs who had got out of control.

He therefore entrusted his driver, Julius Schreck, with the task of assembling a personal bodyguard. "The Schutz Staffel, or SS, was to be a select band of no more than 10 men plus an officer in each district … These SS men were to be specially selected, and only those of sober habit, aged 25 to 35, of good standing with no criminal record, of good health and robust physique would be considered."

In 1925, Adolf Hitler's Schutzstaffel (SS) was ready, and every one of the bodyguards pledged their complete loyalty to the party leader, who had been released from prison around Christmas 1924. In addition to protecting Hitler with their lives and attacking his opponents, the SS was tasked with monitoring other parties and maintaining party discipline within the NSDAP. The new bodyguards were easily recognisable in their distinctive black uniforms, marked by a skull on the cap and SS runes on the collar.

Himmler created a racially pure corps

Among the first SS members were Rudolf Hess, Hermann Göring and Heinrich Himmler. In 1929, Himmler was appointed head of the SS – now numbering 280 men – with the title Reichsführer-SS. His vision was to create a "National Socialist Soldier Order of Nordic Men", a racial vanguard who would obey Hitler's every command without question.

Under Himmler's leadership, the SS developed into one of history's most brutal, notorious and murderous organisations – the very backbone of the Nazi terror regime. But not just anyone could join. Candidates had to be at least 1.70 metres tall – Himmler himself, according to his own account, measured 1.745 metres without shoes.

A decisive requirement was that applicants prove their 'Aryan' ancestry and present a family tree reaching back to at least 1750. If any 'non-Aryan' forebears turned up in their lineage – for example Jews, the mentally ill or other racially 'inferior' individuals – applicants could forget about being admitted to the elite corps. Candidates also had to undergo an examination in which doctors assessed their physique and appearance. If they found visible signs of 'foreign blood', such as unusually high cheekbones or so-called Mongoloid features, the candidate was dismissed.

Doctors also routinely rejected men with a tendency to varicose veins – and it wasn't only the applicants themselves who had to pass muster. Himmler also required that future wives of SS members undergo biological testing, to ensure that the National Socialist elite would not risk degenerating.

For the sake of "selecting and maintaining blood that is racially and genetically of high quality", SS men had to apply for marriage approval through a newly established Race Office of the SS. Only if the prospective bride was "healthy, hereditary stable and at least racially equal" would Himmler give his blessing to the marriage. The SS leader personally received photographs of every woman on his desk – and occasionally offered a word of advice. For instance, he recommended that an overweight woman consult an SS doctor, as the extra weight might be the result of "a malfunctioning of the ductless glands".

Himmler also made no secret of his distaste for women who wore make-up – "painted dolls", he sneered. In a message to one applicant, he remarked: "[Your] fiancée should not paint herself in that way. It is not the done thing in the SS."

Loyal troops purged the SA

Formally, the SS was subordinate to the armed stormtroopers of the SA, who numbered up to 700,000 when Hitler came to power in 1933. With its sheer size, the bully army had become an independent power »

The elite corps fought in some of the war's fiercest battles – including at Kursk, in Normandy and during the Battle of the Bulge.
BUNDESARCHIV

Allgemeine-SS

Founded: 1934

Commander: Heinrich Himmler

Primary role: To monitor the population and suppress resistance

The Allgemeine-SS helped crush uprisings in areas under Nazi control.
BUNDESARCHIV

Allgemeine-SS eradicated all resistance

The SS was divided into four branches. One was the Allgemeine-SS, which served as a security force in Germany and the occupied territories. Its job was to suppress any form of opposition.

After the Nazis took power in 1933, the SS was split into four sub-organisations. Among them was the *Allgemeine-SS* – General SS – the administrative and political arm of the SS.

It played a central role in enforcing Nazi state control and promoting Nazi ideology. Its tools included constant surveillance of the population and suppression of political dissent – in short, the Allgemeine-SS spread fear, enforced obedience and maintained order.

Working closely with the secret state police (Gestapo) and the security service (Sicherheitsdienst), it helped identify and eliminate enemies of the regime. The Allgemeine-SS was organised into regional units that covered all of Germany and the occupied areas.

» within the Nazi Party – a force actively working to block the SS's growth and influence. Rumours even claimed that several senior members – including SA leader Ernst Röhm, one of Hitler's earliest and closest friends – were plotting a socialist revolution. Röhm had once been a trusted confidant of the Führer, but he now harboured political ambitions and threatened to use his power.

In 1934, the rebellious Röhm declared, for instance, that the SA should be merged with the regular army and form the nucleus of a new people's army – with him at its head. That plan sent Hitler into a rage. Convinced that his old friend had become a traitor and "poisoning ... the wells of domestic life", the Führer ordered a purge of the SA leadership. The SS received secret instructions to eliminate Röhm and other high-ranking SA men in a carefully orchestrated massacre that would later become known as the Night of the Long Knives.

One by one, selected members of the SA were executed by Hitler's loyal elite troops. In the Reichstag, Hitler later explained that 77 people had died. In reality, the number was likely closer to 400. The Führer never denied that he was behind the purge and added a warning:

"Let it be known for all time to come that if anyone raises his hand to strike the state, then certain death is his lot."

Since the Nazis controlled both the police and the judiciary, Hitler had no need to fear legal consequences. Shortly after the massacre, the SA was subordinated to the SS and lost its significance, while the SS became the backbone of the Nazi regime.

Among the prominent SS figures involved in the three-day purge was one Theodor Eicke. Without hesitation, he shot Ernst Röhm – who, incidentally, was the godfather of his eldest son. For this service, Eicke was promoted to SS Group Leader and appointed inspector of the entire concentration camp system then being established.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Historians estimate that the SS murdered more than one million Jews between 1941 and 1942. After that, the killings were transferred to camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau.

As early as June 1933, Eicke had been appointed commandant of Germany's first concentration camp, Dachau, near Munich. Even within the SS, he quickly gained a reputation for extraordinary cruelty, sadism and burning hatred of anyone who did not share his Nazi ideology.

Eicke's views of Nazism's enemies were summarised by Rupert Butler thus: "The enemy was a Jewish-Bolshevik subhuman, intent on annihilating the Reich unless he was prevented. Such prevention was to be achieved without mercy or pity."

Communists, socialists, intellectuals and artists were among the first inmates in Dachau, where Eicke enforced a harsh code of conduct with brutal punishments. Attempted escape or political debate led to execution; lesser offences were met with various forms of mistreatment and violence.

For example, prisoners who overslept were locked in for three days. And when Eicke became chief of the Concentration Camps Inspectorate in 1934, he made sure his disciplinary code was rolled out across the system. The camps became an apparatus designed to break and destroy the Nazi regime's enemies through forced labour, starvation, disease, torture and murder. What had begun as a small group of hand-picked bodyguards developed during the 1930s into a sprawling SS organisation with many branches, a large bureaucracy and even a commercial division that rented out camp labourers to German companies at a fixed daily rate. In 1936, Hitler appointed Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler as head of the German police – a move that greatly strengthened the SS's position. Himmler unified the entire party and state security apparatus under his control. The SS was no longer just a party organisation – it had become a state within the state and one of the most powerful institutions in Nazi Germany.

Himmler appointed one of his most trusted men – the blond and pale Reinhard Heydrich – as head of the secret police, the Gestapo, which was now also part of the SS. With ruthless precision, Heydrich developed a surveillance system that spread fear among the German population. Combining modern investigative methods with extreme brutality, the Gestapo hunted down political opponents. No one was safe from Heydrich's terror apparatus – Gestapo agents had eyes and ears in every housing block throughout the Reich.

"No letter, no telephone conversation, no word on the street is safe any more. Everyone fears the next person may be an informer," wrote literature professor Victor Klemperer in his diary.

Unemployed people were 'disciplined'

Hitler's central goal was to cleanse the German race of what he considered harmful elements. It wasn't long before political prisoners in the concentration camps were joined by habitual criminals and so-called antisocial elements, such as beggars, Roma, prostitutes, pimps, homosexuals, vagrants – and the unemployed. The latter were described as "work-shy and lazy elements" in need of correction.

Jews, in particular, became the target of persecution. Barely had Hitler seized power in 1933 before the regime began introducing the first of what would become thousands of anti-Jewish laws. These were followed in 1935 by the so-called Nuremberg Laws, which rendered Jews second-class citizens and stripped them of voting rights, eligibility for public office and civil service posts. The laws also forbade marriage and "sexual relations" between Jews and those deemed to be of "German or related blood". In 1939, Heydrich – who by then had earned nicknames such as the Blond Beast, the Butcher and the Hangman – was placed in charge of the so-called Jewish Question. He was convinced that if the Führer's dream of a Greater Germanic Reich was to be realised, Europe's Jews would have to be removed. In his view, the Jews were working "to destroy the blood and spiritual values of our people" by any means possible.

Whether the Jews were to be deported to Madagascar or Siberia, shot or gassed – all options Heydrich considered – mattered less »

Waffen-SS

Founded: 1939, through merger of several SS units
Commanders: Sepp Dietrich, Paul Hausser & Felix Steiner, among others
Primary role: Combat and extermination of Jews

SS soldiers were Hitler's elite troops

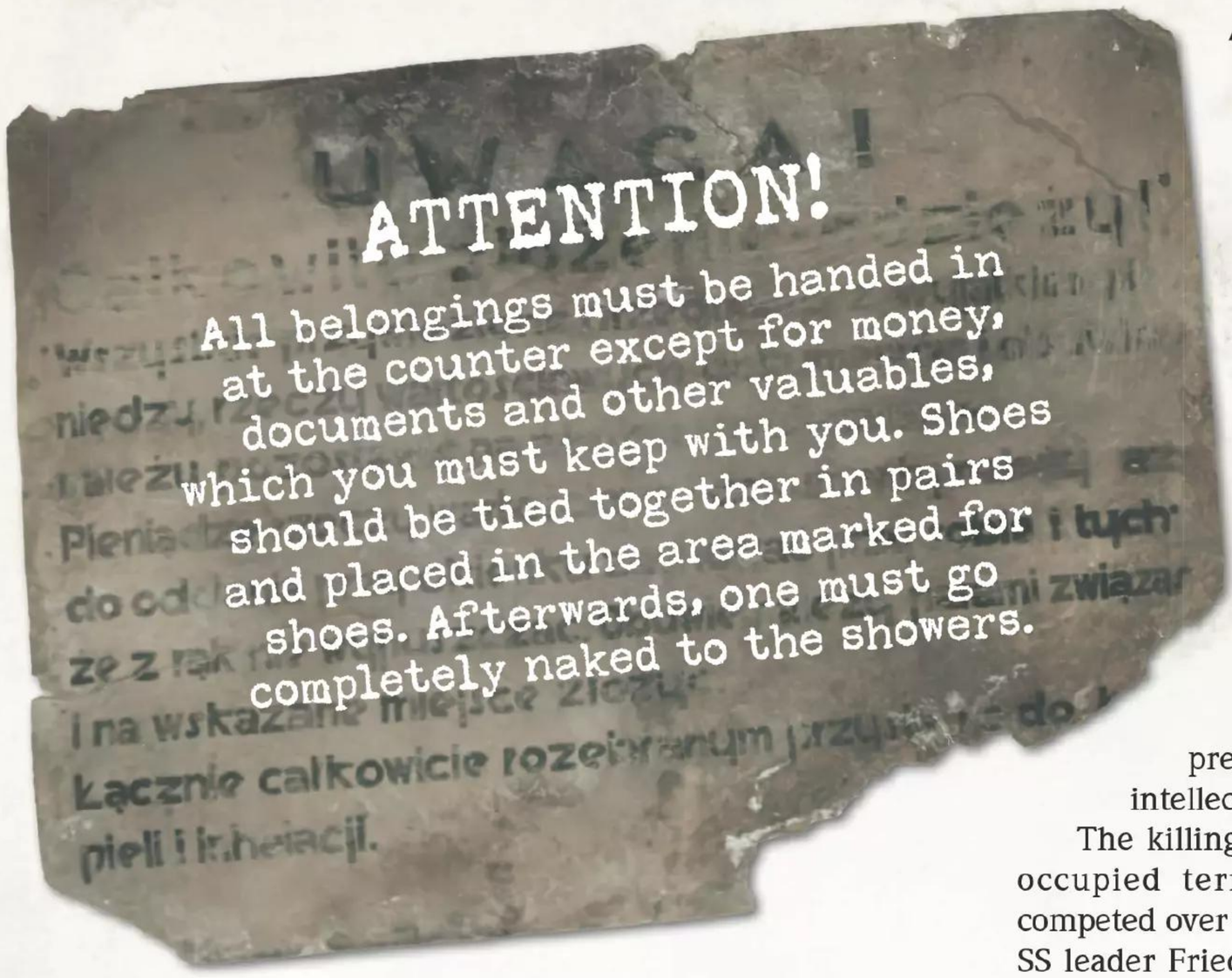
The Waffen-SS fought on the battlefield with the latest and most advanced weapons – and a fanatical ideology rooted in racial hatred and blind obedience to Hitler.

The armed branch of the SS, the *Waffen-SS* – also known as Hitler's Black Order – evolved from a modest bodyguard unit into a vast wartime army of nearly one million soldiers.

Many volunteered for the elite force of 'racially pure' political soldiers, but as the war dragged on and German casualties mounted, the SS resorted to forced conscription. Up to 200,000 foreign volunteers also joined from across Europe. By the end of the war, the Waffen-SS had even compromised its Aryan ideals by admitting Muslim recruits.

The Waffen-SS primarily consisted of front-line troops equipped with the most advanced military technology, including modern tanks. Their mission was to serve Nazi interests, and they were central to Himmler's vision of building a Greater Germanic and racially pure empire after the war.

Towards the end of the war, the Waffen-SS suffered heavy losses as it was deployed to resist the advancing Soviet, British and US forces on all fronts.
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



At the Bełzec extermination camp, half a million Jews were murdered before the Nazis erased all traces. Archaeologists have since found a broken sign testifying to the mass murder.
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

» than the overall efficiency of the plan. By this point, Heydrich had complete oversight of the Jewish population; he had established a registry of all Jews in Germany, including those who had emigrated. Every Jew in Europe had been counted. With chilling efficiency, the cold-blooded technocrat had laid the groundwork for the Holocaust.

When Germany invaded Poland on 1st September 1939, the SS's military wing – the Waffen-SS – was given the opportunity to prove itself. With a mix of brutal physical training and ideological indoctrination in its barracks, the troops had become fearless warriors, soon notorious for their extreme brutality and fanaticism. The Waffen-SS's main task was to terrorise civilians and murder Jews. Arrests, torture, mutilations, executions and public shootings became routine within the first month of the war.

The army had had enough of the atrocities

The SS's actions were so merciless that soldiers from the regular German army lodged complaints about SS terror – including in the Polish town of Turck. A protest letter described how, in October 1939, a group of Jews was herded into a synagogue and forced to crawl between the pews while singing, all the while being whipped by SS men. Afterwards, they were made to pull down their trousers and were beaten on their bare buttocks. One of the victims, who had soiled himself out of fear, was reportedly forced to smear the excrement on to the faces of the others.

Just weeks earlier, in September 1939, a Waffen-SS soldier had driven 50 Polish Jews into a synagogue and shot them – reportedly in an act of "youthful exuberance", according to the SS's own military court. Such atrocities were just a foretaste of the many massacres and systematic war crimes that would soon become the SS's grim trademark.

In the occupied territories, a special SS unit known as the *Einsatzgruppen* (Deployment Groups) was deployed. Its task was clearly defined: to be "employed in rear areas fighting all anti-German elements". In plain terms, they were there to 'cleanse' areas behind the advancing Wehrmacht – to comb through the occupied regions, identify Jews, political opponents and other unwanted individuals, and execute them. During the invasion of the Soviet Union, each SS division was assigned an Einsatzgruppe. Fuelled by an intense hatred of Jews and 'inferior races', these mobile killing squads descended into bloodthirsty rampages, carrying out targeted massacres of innocent civilians.

The Einsatzgruppen often operated from pre-prepared lists of names – including those of Jews, intellectuals and other supposed enemies of the Reich.

The killings began as soon as the groups entered newly occupied territory, and their commanders sometimes competed over who could murder most efficiently. For instance, SS leader Friedrich Jeckeln in Riga boasted of inventing the "*Sardinenpackung*" ("sardine packing") technique: victims were lined up along the edge of a trench so that, when shot, their bodies would fall neatly in rows. The next group would then be made to stand atop the corpses. This, Jeckeln claimed, saved time digging graves while maximising burial space.

The Einsatzgruppen reported their killings to Berlin, detailing who had been murdered and in what numbers. Between 1941 and 1942 alone, more than one million Jews were killed by these units. But the Nazis were only just getting started – the murder campaign was about to escalate.

Everything was set for industrial mass murder

Hitler's blond executioner, Reinhard Heydrich, had prepared his final plans with ruthless precision. In January 1942, he convened a meeting at a villa in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee, where he proudly presented "the Final Solution" – a detailed blueprint for the physical extermination of the Jews.

Heydrich had completed the headcount. The concentration camps were operational. The railway network was efficient. And the Zyklon B poison gas had proven remarkably effective during tests conducted at Auschwitz in the autumn of 1941. With Hitler's approval, Heydrich was now free to set the genocide in motion – and its implementation was entrusted to Himmler and the SS.

Among the SS divisions, SS-Totenkopf – Death's Head – stood out as Hitler's most willing killers. This unit took charge of running and guarding the death camps. After the decision to carry out the systematic mass murder of Jews, the SS established Auschwitz – the largest and most notorious of all the camps.

Each day, thousands of people arrived at the Auschwitz-Birkenau ramp, crammed into overcrowded cattle wagons. Many had died en route, and the survivors were weakened by days without food or water. Brutally, they were driven from the trains by shouting SS men and snarling dogs. Beaten and kicked, the prisoners were forced towards a counter where all their »

SS-Totenkopf

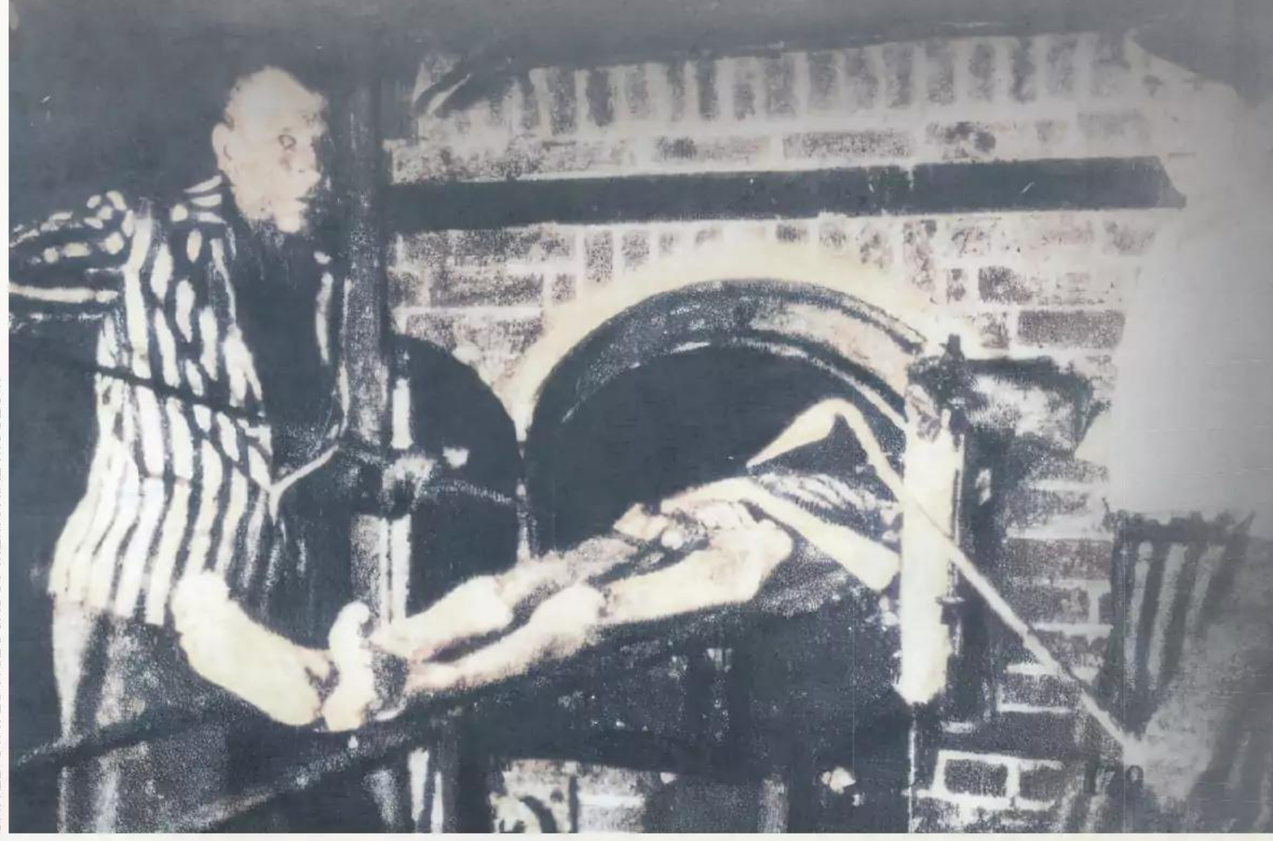
Founded: 1936
Commander: Theodor Eicke
Primary role: Guarding concentration camps and organising the Holocaust

Death's Head soldiers guarded the camps

Even among SS units, Totenkopf stood out for its brutality. The group, named after its chilling skull emblem, was behind some of the war's worst atrocities – including the mass extermination of Jews.

Among the SS divisions, the soldiers of *SS-Totenkopf* – Death's Head – were especially notorious for their savagery. Brutality and obedience were the group's watchwords, which from 1936 was tasked with operating and guarding the Third Reich's concentration camps. Totenkopf guards had free rein to treat prisoners however they liked – compassion was seen as weakness, while contempt and violence were marks of strength.

The Death's Head soldiers carried out the mass murder inside the extermination camps – their name came from the skull insignia on their caps, symbolising their willingness to die for victory. Totenkopf served not only as a camp guard unit but also fought as combat troops within the Waffen-SS, rotating between the front lines and the camps. If they didn't become dehumanised in one place, they certainly would in the other. In fact, the majority of German massacres against civilians were committed by this single SS unit.



UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

The skull insignia became synonymous with some of the worst massacres of World War II.
SHUTTERSTOCK

» belongings were confiscated. Many clung desperately to the hope of survival – but SS camp commander Karl Fritzsch swiftly extinguished that hope with an icy welcome:

"You have not come here to a sanatorium, but to the German concentration camp Auschwitz … The only way out of here is through the chimney."

On the ramp, fates were decided in seconds. Families were torn apart. Children were separated from their parents as SS doctors wordlessly motioned left or right. Those deemed fit for work were sent one way. The rest were herded in the opposite direction – directly to the gas chambers. For those whose lives were temporarily spared, terror still awaited. Beatings, starvation and constant abuse by SS guards were the norm. Particularly feared was SS doctor Josef Mengele, who arrived at Auschwitz in 1943 and became infamous for his sadism.

As he whistled operetta tunes, Mengele cheerfully selected prisoners from the ramp with surgical precision, choosing subjects for his grotesque medical experiments. Children, people with dwarfism and twins were among his favourites – "my guinea pigs" as he called them. They endured unimaginable suffering, often with fatal consequences.

Mengele sewed people together without anaesthesia, injected chemicals into their eyes, removed organs and limbs, and administered poison directly into their hearts.

When Soviet troops liberated Auschwitz on 27th January 1945, the SS had only just fled. Most prisoners had either been executed or forced on death marches to other camps. Before retreating, Hitler's henchmen tried to erase all evidence of their crimes – warehouses filled with clothes from over one million murdered victims were torched, and the crematoria were blown up.

Roughly three months later, in late April 1945, US liberators reached Dachau – the Nazis' 'model camp'. Outside, they discovered over 30 railway wagons filled with decomposing corpses. During the liberation, around 560 remaining SS guards tried to resist but were forced to surrender after heavy fighting.

Roughly 32,000 emaciated prisoners could finally leave what had been a living hell. In the aftermath, US troops summarily executed several SS guards on the spot. After the war, many SS officers had a brief taste of their own medicine – imprisoned in Dachau while awaiting trial before war crimes tribunals. □

GETTY IMAGES

After the war, Allied soldiers forced German civilians to witness the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime. The aim was to ensure no one could deny the Holocaust – though ultimately in vain.

Irma Grese became the symbol of the brutal female camp guard. Armed with a whip and pistol, she forced female prisoners in Auschwitz into sexual acts before sending them to the gas chambers. After the war, she was sentenced to death for her crimes.

SS-Frauenkorps

Founded: 1942

Commanders: Hermine Braunsteiner, Maria Mandl and Irma Grese, among others

Primary role: Secretaries and guards in the concentration camps

Women had their own dedicated SS unit

Thousands of women volunteered for the SS to take part in the atrocities at the extermination camps. They wrote death lists, guarded female prisoners and assisted with the gruesome medical experiments conducted by SS doctors.

Women could also become SS personnel and around 7,900 volunteered to join the *SS-Frauenkorps* (Women's Corps), where they typically worked as secretaries, telegraph operators and guards in the concentration camps. The women were assigned to various SS departments and handled office tasks – such as compiling the daily death lists of prisoners to be executed. They also assisted the SS medical corps with horrific experiments on inmates. SS women served as guards in women's camps, including the notorious Ravensbrück, where around 90,000 perished due to starvation, abuse, forced labour and murder.

Officially, SS-Frauenkorps were not members of the elite corps, since the SS was formally reserved for men. But they were often the wives, widows or daughters of SS personnel and gained access that way. The women had no official SS uniform but often wore SS armbands.

A photograph shows SS women and men enjoying a day off from their duties in Auschwitz. The image was taken in 1944 – at the height of the mass killings.

BUNDESARCHIV

From best friends to bitter rivals: HITLER'S UNHOLY TRINITY

One had a club foot and was a short, fervent Nazi who, despite his model family man image, gained notoriety as a compulsive womaniser. Another was a drug addict who indulged in luxurious living, more drawn to pomp and parties than war. The third was obsessed with the occult and ice-cold by nature. He watched mass executions of Jews with interest but without emotion, yet couldn't bear the thought of animals being killed. Together, they sat atop Hitler's power pyramid – until the regime's final days, when they turned into arch-enemies.

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Göring

was pushed aside

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Himmler

betrayed Hitler

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Goebbels

won the power struggle

"This man has everything to be king … The coming dictator," wrote Joseph Goebbels, deeply enamoured, in his diary one November day in 1925. The 28-year-old German had just met Hitler for the very first time, and the experience left an indelible impression.

"With him we can conquer the world," Goebbels assessed, offering nothing but praise for the Nazi Party's autocratic leader. He had "large blue eyes, like stars", noted the enchanted admirer. Goebbels had joined the Nazi Party the year before, initially aligning with its left wing. But after meeting the more right-leaning Adolf Hitler, he abandoned all reservations about the party leader.

He wasn't the only one to be won over by Hitler – his extraordinary oratory skills had a way of sweeping the feet out from under the people he met. Behind those intense blue eyes burned a relentless fire, and something about his charisma made people surrender to him and his vision of restoring Germany to greatness.

The highly decorated flying ace Hermann Göring and academic Heinrich Himmler were no exception. Both first encountered the then relatively unknown Nazi leader during a meeting in Munich in the autumn of 1922. With infectious passion, Hitler demanded a rebirth of Germany, railed against the Treaty of Versailles, and thundered against communists and Jews, holding them accountable for the nation's ills.

That event marked the beginning of a deep commitment to the Nazi Party and an unshakable loyalty to Hitler for both Göring and Himmler. Had Hitler been able to look into the future, he would have seen that Goebbels, Göring and Himmler would come to play critical roles in his regime – and become three of the most influential figures in the Third Reich.

Outwardly, the three young men couldn't have been more different. Goebbels was small and thin with a club foot, appearing almost dwarf-like next to the tall, athletic and charming Göring. Himmler, by contrast, made little impression physically – he was ordinary in every sense, with a weak chin, high forehead and nerdy appearance. But what they lacked in shared physical traits, they made up for in their unwavering devotion to Hitler and the Nazi cause. Himmler even declared that he would "shoot my mother" if Hitler asked – and that he would be "proud of [the] confidence" the Führer had placed in him.

New Nazi to create a corps of thugs

Like many other WWI veterans, Hermann Göring struggled to accept Germany's surrender and felt betrayed by the politicians who had negotiated the Treaty of Versailles. That sense of betrayal led him to join the Nazi Party in 1922. His enlistment drew national attention – Göring, a war hero, was no ordinary recruit. Hitler was thrilled to welcome the celebrated fighter pilot into the fold.

"Splendid, a war ace with the Pour le Mérite [Germany's highest military honour] – imagine it! Excellent propaganda! Moreover, he has money and doesn't cost me a pfennig!" Hitler exclaimed enthusiastically after persuading Göring to lead the Nazi paramilitary wing, the SA *(Sturmabteilung)*.

Göring was tasked with both organising and expanding the SA. These stormtroopers were to march through the streets, attract supporters and intimidate political opponents. The war hero threw himself into the role with great vigour – much to Hitler's satisfaction.

"I liked him. I made him the head of my SA. He's the only one of its heads who ran the SA properly. I gave him a dishevelled rabble. In a very short time, he had organised a division of 11,000 men," Hitler later noted.

Göring started revolution with a sword

In November 1923, the increasingly ambitious Hitler resolved to seize power »

Hitler had a close bond with his three allies. Here he attends the funeral of Göring's first wife, Carin, in 1934.

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WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Göring

Name: Hermann Wilhelm Göring
Born: 1893
Died: 1946
Education: Officer (1911)

Göring excelled at the academy

Hermann Göring's early years were marked by heroism and strong academic performance before he joined the Nazi Party in 1922 and quickly rose to its top ranks.

For most of their childhood, Göring and his four siblings lived in a castle in Bavaria. Their father had been Reich Commissioner and the highest civil servant in the colony of German South West Africa (now Namibia) before returning to Germany. Their mother, Franziska Tiefenbrunn, came from a Bavarian farming family.

Göring showed an early fascination with the military and history. He loved playing with toy soldiers and dressing up in a Boer uniform given by his father.

He attended various military academies and proved to be an ambitious student. In 1911, he passed his officer's exam with top marks and, during World War I, served as an infantry officer in the attack on France.

At one point, he photographed enemy positions from the air and later gained fame as a fighter pilot. His 22 aerial victories during the war earned him Germany's highest honours: the Pour le Mérite and the Grand Cross of the Iron Cross.

In the interwar years, Göring studied history, political science and economics at the University of Munich but never completed his studies. In 1922, he joined the Nazi Party and became leader of the party's paramilitary wing, the SA.

Almost every German knew the war hero Göring as a handsome, brave, intelligent pilot.
BUNDESARCHIV

» by force. He had seen how the fascist leader Benito Mussolini came to power in Italy in October 1922 by having his party soldiers, the blackshirts, march on Rome, so on the evening of 8th November 1923, Hitler, along with Hermann Göring, Heinrich Himmler and other top Nazis, as well as 2,000 armed SA troops, marched through the streets of Munich. Their destination was the Bürgerbräukeller beer hall, where the political elite of the state of Bavaria was meeting.

At around 20.30, Hitler pushed his way through the crowd in the beer hall towards the rostrum, drawing his Browning pistol. A few steps from the podium, he climbed on to a chair and fired into the air.

"The national revolution has broken out!" he proclaimed, announcing that the governments of Bavaria and Berlin had been overthrown.

While the frail, pale Heinrich Himmler participated in the attempted coup in a modest role as a standard-bearer, the solid, square-cut Göring stomped into the beer hall, sword raised, ready for battle. However, the coup plotters soon had to admit that Germany wasn't ready for revolution. Despite the coup's evident failure by the morning of 9th November, almost 2,000 Nazis marched through Munich to the War Ministry, where a firefight with the police ensued. Sixteen Nazis and four police officers lost their lives. While Hitler dislocated his left shoulder in a fall and was arrested by the police shortly afterwards, standard-bearer Himmler was able to leave the battlefield unharmed. Hermann Göring, on the other hand, was severely wounded by gunshots in the thigh and groin, but managed to escape to Austria and then to Sweden with the help of his wife, Carin.

In exile in Austria, Hermann Göring underwent surgery for his gunshot wounds. When the wounds became infected, doctors prescribed morphine for the severe pain – but the encounter with opioids proved fatal, as it marked the beginning of a lifelong drug addiction.

When the injuries finally healed, the Göring couple travelled to Carin's homeland, Sweden – but the uncontrollable craving for morphine followed them. The previously athletic and charming war hero now changed in both character and appearance. He became unbalanced and manic, couldn't sleep, and exploded in sudden fits of rage, throwing furniture around. As the »

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Himmler

Name: Heinrich Himmler
Born: 1900
Died: 1945
Education: Agriculture (1922)

Physique and eyesight troubled young Himmler

Heinrich Himmler was intelligent but odd, according to teachers and classmates. Before becoming one of the Nazi regime's most brutal men, he tried his hand at chicken farming.

Heinrich Himmler was the middle child of three and grew up in a wealthy Catholic family with close ties to the Bavarian royal house – he was even named after Prince Heinrich of Bavaria, whom his father had tutored. At school, Heinrich was bright and diligent, but classmates found him strange. Physical education was a nightmare, because he was slight and frail, and frequently ill.

In 1918, Himmler trained as a teacher like his father – his dream of joining the navy was thwarted because he wore glasses. In the final phase of World War I, Himmler volunteered, and in 1922, he completed his studies in agriculture. He tried working as a chicken farmer, but after joining the Nazi Party in 1923, his political career took off.

Sources report that Himmler was unmoved during his visits to concentration camps, where he wrote letters home to his wife about prisoners he saw murdered.

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Hitler grew close to Goebbels's children, who were with him in the Führerbunker to the very end. It was there that Goebbels had them murdered.
BUNDESARCHIV

» delusions increased, so did his weight – Göring gradually became a heavy, bloated travesty of his former self. And during his exile, his problems grew. In order to finance her spouse's accelerating abuse, Carin was forced to sell almost everything the couple owned, and in the end, Göring became so erratic that Carin gave him an ultimatum: divorce or rehab.

Göring chose the latter option and had to go through two humiliating courses of treatment, during which doctors more than once felt compelled to put him in a straitjacket. During a psychiatric hospital stay in Stockholm, experts concluded that Göring harboured an extremely intense, almost pathological hatred of Jews.

Women excited Goebbels

Unlike Göring, Himmler and numerous other Nazis, Joseph Goebbels didn't belong to the group of greats who'd taken an active part in World War I. Because of his club foot, he couldn't serve as a soldier, a fact that left him with a lingering inferiority complex. He also didn't participate in the 1923 coup attempt. Instead, the unemployed academic pursued political activism – when he wasn't chasing women.

From his youth, Goebbels had an insatiable appetite for the opposite sex. "Every woman rouses my blood," he confided in his diary.

Despite being naturally shy and, with his slight limp and dry demeanour, far from the Nazi male ideal, Goebbels had no trouble attracting women – perhaps it was his rich, deep voice or lightning intellect.

He also nurtured an almost erotic fascination with Hitler, who in 1926 appointed him Gauleiter (regional leader) and head of propaganda in Berlin, where the Nazi Party was weak.

"How I love him! What a fellow!" Goebbels wrote of Hitler in his diary. But Hitler wasn't his only great love. In 1930, when Goebbels, as the Nazi Party's propaganda chief, met the divorced Magda Quandt, he instinctively sensed that he had met the love of his life. The tall, blonde, elegant upper-class woman was, like himself, an ardent Nazi and worked as a secretary on his staff in Berlin. After months of relentless pursuit, Goebbels wrote triumphantly in his diary on 15th February 1931 that she had visited his home:

"[She] blossomed in a bewitching blonde sweetness," he wrote, adding a discreet number one, a symbol that he and Magda had been to bed together for the first time. More numbers and praise for the "beautiful, beautiful woman [w]hom I could well love" followed, and on 19th December 1931, Magda married Goebbels in a civil ceremony at the town hall. Adolf Hitler attended as best man and witness.

That same year brought tragedy to the Göring couple, who had returned to Germany in 1927. Carin, who had long suffered from tuberculosis and heart issues, died at just 42 years old in October 1931. Her death devastated Hermann, who later built a lavish hunting lodge north of Berlin and named it Carinhall in honour of the great love of his life. He also named a luxury yacht after her.

Despite his personal struggles, Göring clawed his way up the Nazi hierarchy. Throughout the 1930s, he ruthlessly outmanoeuvred his rivals and rose to the top of the Nazi Party. He would become "either a great man or a great criminal",

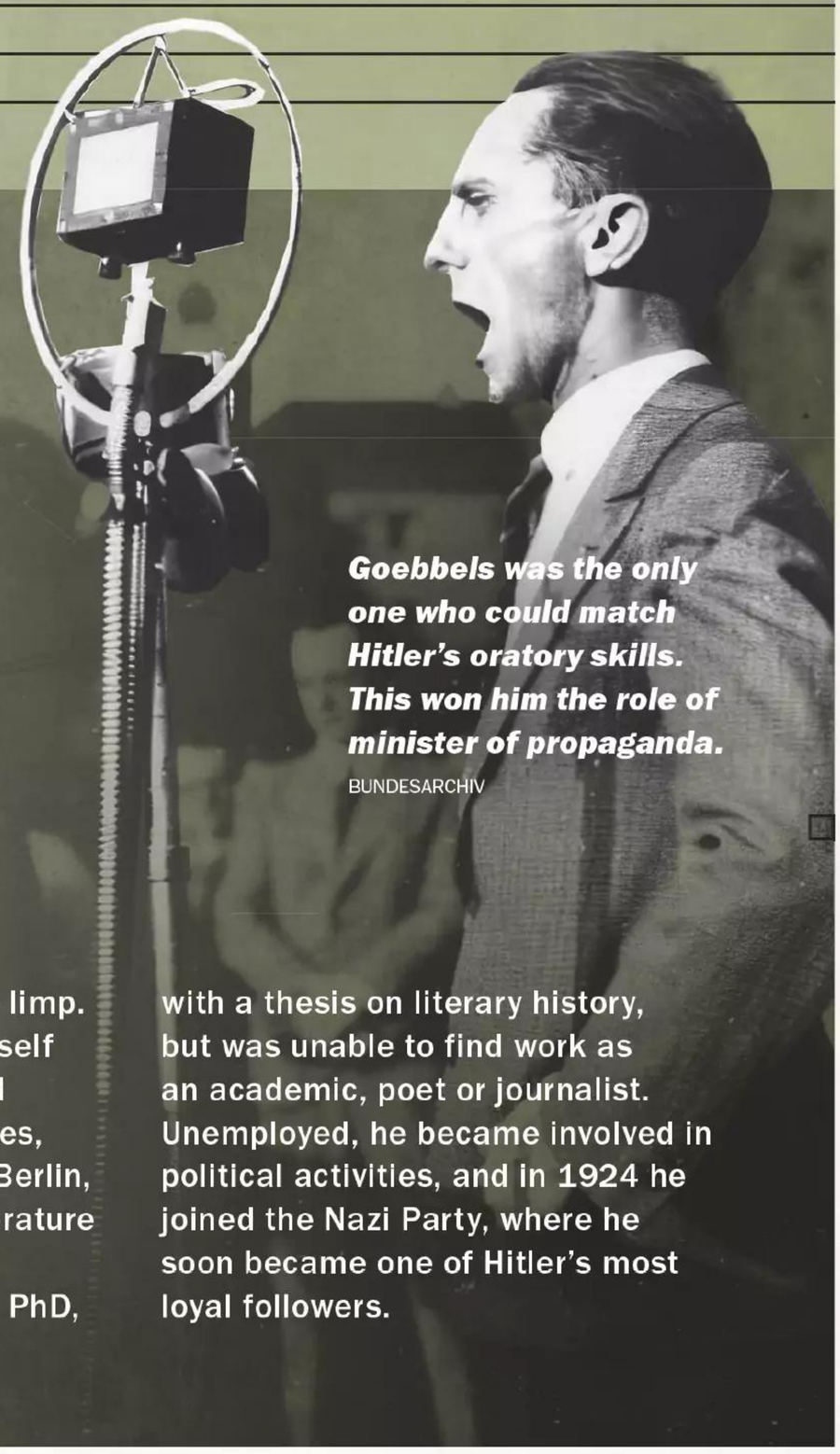
Goebbels

Name: Joseph Goebbels
Born: 1897
Died: 1945
Education: PhD (1922)

Illness nearly claimed Goebbels's life

Joseph Goebbels narrowly survived childhood and later turned to studies in history and philosophy. After graduating, he found himself unemployed.

Joseph Goebbels grew up in a Catholic home with five siblings and was the son of an accountant. As a boy, he nearly succumbed to pneumonia, and during World War I, he suffered the indignity of being rejected for military service due to his club foot, a congenital condition that caused him to limp. Instead, Goebbels threw himself into his studies and attended several prestigious universities, including Bonn, Munich and Berlin, where he studied history, literature and philosophy. In 1922, he completed his studies with a PhD, with a thesis on literary history, but was unable to find work as an academic, poet or journalist. Unemployed, he became involved in political activities, and in 1924 he joined the Nazi Party, where he soon became one of Hitler's most loyal followers.



Goebbels was the only one who could match Hitler's oratory skills. This won him the role of minister of propaganda.
BUNDESARCHIV

Göring's mother had once said. Time would prove her right – on both counts.

Himmler found a soulmate

In July 1928, a good three years before Carin Göring's death, Heinrich Himmler married the nurse Margarete Boden – known simply as Marga. With her blonde hair and blue eyes, she embodied the Nazi female ideal, and like her husband, she was fascinated by the occult. Marga taught her husband about natural medicine and homeopathy, and they bonded over their deep hatred of Jews.

Their only child, Gudrun, was born on 8th August 1929. That same year, Hitler appointed Himmler as *Reichsführer* of the SS *(Schutzstaffel),* originally a small security detail whose primary task was protecting Hitler. At the time, the SS numbered barely 300 men, but under Himmler's firm leadership, it quickly grew into an enormous, powerful organisation – in 1933, just four years after his appointment, the elite force numbered over 50,000 men.

Himmler was proud of his new role, demanding utmost discipline from his subordinates from the very beginning. He viewed the SS as a sacred order to realise Nazi racial ideology and create a new type of human, and propaganda leader Goebbels appeared to respect Himmler's efforts. In his diary, at least, he described Himmler as "not particularly clever, but hard-working and well-meaning".

While Himmler was constantly travelling due to his work, he and Marga tried to supplement their modest income selling »

» farm produce and breeding animals – especially poultry – in a village near Munich. But in letters to her husband, Marga rarely had good news:

"The rabbits are not doing anything yet. Eleven trees are completely dead. The hens are laying really badly. I am so careful, but the money is gone again right away," she lamented.

Hitler rewarded his inner circle

When Adolf Hitler was sworn in as Germany's new chancellor on 30th January 1933, Berlin was lit up by the glow of thousands of torches. Legions of uniformed brownshirts marched through the capital in tribute to Germany's new leader, and Hitler's closest and most loyal supporters could barely contain their excitement – the day the triumvirate had long dreamed of and worked hard towards had finally arrived.

Goebbels saw it as his mission to transform the German people into Nazis who regarded Hitler as their guiding star, and with ruthless and targeted propaganda, he had achieved his goal. On the evening of the seizure of power, he enthusiastically noted in his diary that Berliners were hailing Hitler as "the Führer, the Prophet, the Fighter ... the last hope of the masses, the shining symbol of the German will to freedom".

As a reward for their loyalty, Adolf Hitler installed his closest and most loyal followers in central and prominent positions. Hermann Göring was appointed minister of the interior for Prussia – the largest and most influential of the German states – and in May 1933 was also appointed minister of aviation. Heinrich Himmler was first given the role of chief of police in Munich, and then chief of all German police.

Hitler's close friend – his "faithful, unshakable shield bearer" – Joseph Goebbels could rejoice at being appointed minister of public enlightenment and propaganda. From his new office on Wilhelmstrasse in Berlin, Goebbels was immediately ready to take propaganda to new heights. The job as Nazi spin doctor was perfect for the eloquent Goebbels, who, in his own words, managed to play on the public psyche "as on a piano". He railed against so-called un-German culture and the Jews, while at the same time exploiting the media to cultivate a cult of personality around Hitler. With icy precision, he controlled public opinion in Germany. But while he had mastery over the nation's mind, he couldn't control his own impulses. Outwardly, the Goebbels family presented a shining image of the Nazi model family. In glossy weekly magazines they smiled broadly at readers and the couple proudly showed off their adorable children and stylish home. But on the inside, things were less than idyllic.

The propaganda minister earned a deserved reputation as an incorrigible womaniser – often juggling two or three affairs at once. In 1936, he began a relationship with Czech actress Lída Baarová. They appeared publicly as a couple, going to the theatre hand in hand and taking boat trips together. Only when Hitler, at Magda's urging, stepped in did Goebbels finally end the affair in late 1938.

"The hens are laying really badly. The money is gone"

Marga Himmler to Heinrich about their financial situation before the Nazi seizure of power.

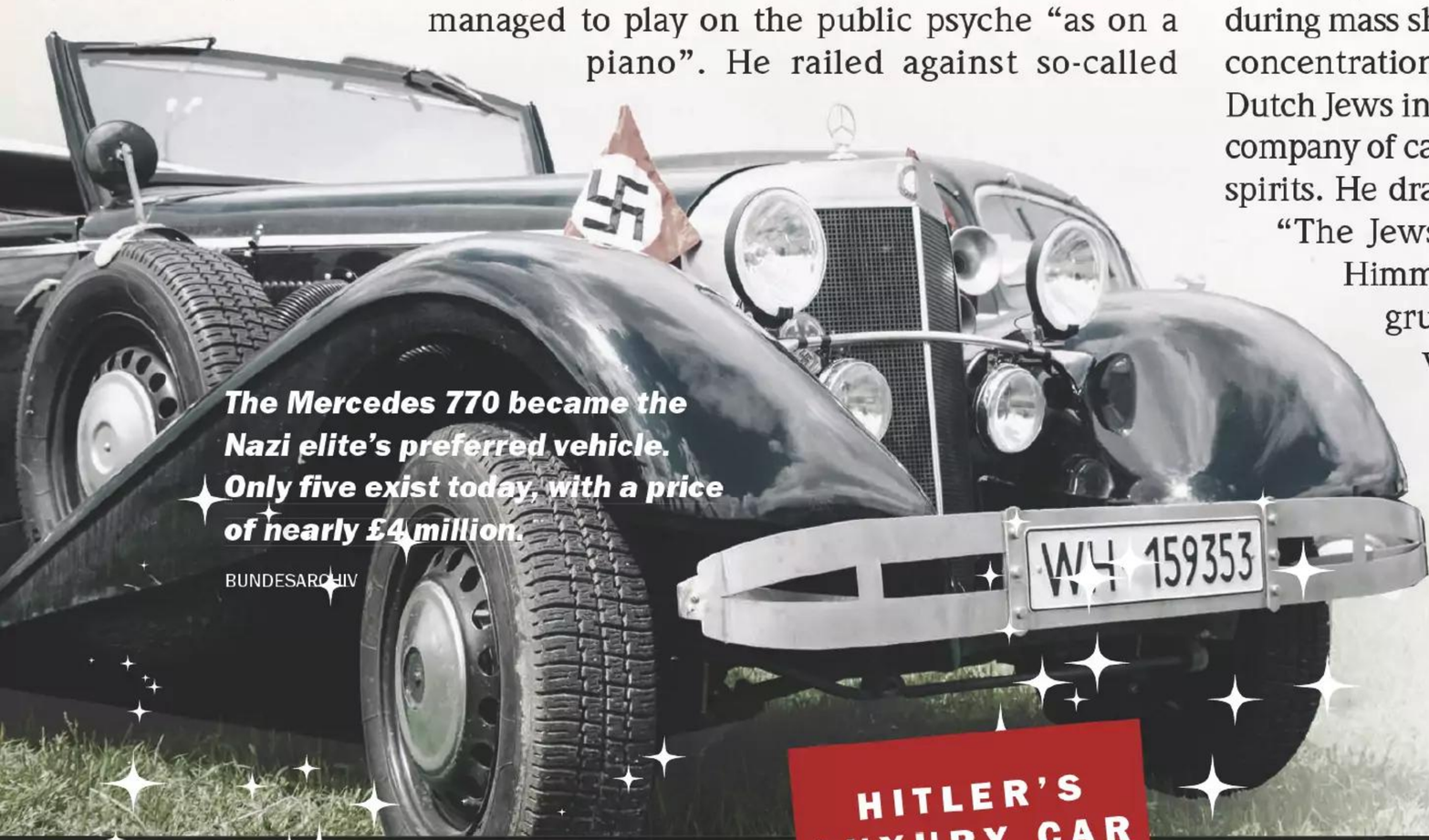
Executions were followed by wine

Under Himmler's command, the Nazis established a network of concentration camps after taking power. As early as 1933, 50,000 communists and social democrats were imprisoned or sent to the newly built camps.

As the head of the SS, Himmler fostered a highly disciplined organisation, anchored in a bizarre ideology of medieval mysticism, Viking mythology and his own home-brewed racial theories. His vision was that the SS would one day form the basis of a new type of human being, an untainted Nordic race. When World War II broke out in 1939, Himmler's power was further strengthened, and he was now second only to Hitler and Hermann Göring. Soon, the SS *Reichsführer* found himself busier than ever. He was entrusted with the task of organising the extermination of Jews and would later go down in history as the architect of the Holocaust, the Nazi genocide of six million Jews.

Himmler visited the concentration camps he helped establish several times to ensure that the mass killings were carried out efficiently. On multiple occasions, he was an interested onlooker during mass shootings, and in July 1942, he visited the Auschwitz concentration camp, where he witnessed the murder of 500 Dutch Jews in a gas chamber. That same evening, he enjoyed the company of camp commandant Rudolf Höss and was in excellent spirits. He drank a couple of glasses of wine and told Höss that, "The Jews who are unfit for work are to be destroyed." Himmler also willingly allowed his camps to be used for gruesome medical experiments – procedures that were carried out without anaesthesia and resulted in severe mutilation or death.

But while he casually ordered the deaths of millions of Jews from behind his desk, Himmler could hardly bear the thought of animals being killed. He harboured a deep aversion to hunting and at one point berated his personal physician, Felix Kersten, for indulging in the activity. "How can you find any pleasure, Herr »



The Mercedes 770 became the Nazi elite's preferred vehicle. Only five exist today, with a price of nearly £4 million.

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HITLER'S LUXURY CAR

As Hitler's most trusted, the role came with perks such as a chauffeur-driven car.
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Nazi elite bathed in luxury and wealth

Although the official salary of a top Nazi was modest, Hitler's inner circle became extraordinarily rich. Gifts from tycoons and lucrative board positions were topped up with stolen art and homes worth millions.

SALARIES

The top Nazis earned around 30,000 Reichsmarks a year – equivalent to around £110,000 today. In comparison, an ordinary worker earned 2,000–5,000 Reichsmarks annually. In reality, the Nazi elite's income was much higher because the leaders received tax-free donations and extravagant gifts from companies and Nazi supporters eager to curry favour with the regime. The Nazi top brass also drew extra income from board positions in state-run firms, particularly arms manufacturers, and received vast sums and valuables from Hitler as rewards for their loyalty.

- Money
- Stocks
- Gifts

PROPERTIES

Nazi leaders were also provided with a host of luxury residences. Goebbels, for instance, had a grand palace in Berlin and a beautiful country estate at Bogensee, north-east of the city. Göring had numerous country homes and hunting lodges, his favourite being Carinhall – named after his first wife. The stately residence was filled with art treasures and included a private cinema, a medical clinic and a model railway over 100 metres long. Himmler, too, had no lack of *Lebensraum* – he had access to several luxurious properties, including a vast villa on Lake Tegernsee, south of Munich.

- Country houses
- Hunting lodges
- Villas

PERKS

The Nazi elite enjoyed a fleet of expensive cars and were provided with personal chauffeurs. They were pampered by a staff of servants, including chefs, gardeners and nannies, and typically wore tailored clothes, often made of expensive fabrics. Göring, for example, was known for his extravagant taste – he had a fondness for silk and fur, and liked to wear handmade boots. Hitler's henchmen also boasted enormous collections of jewellery and art treasures that the Nazis had confiscated in occupied countries and appropriated from Jewish families.

- Clothes
- Art
- Cars

US HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Göring was convicted for his actions after the war. It is unknown how he smuggled a cyanide capsule into his cell.

Hitler's inner circle took their own lives

Hitler's unholy trinity all committed suicide. One shot himself in the Führerbunker, while the other two took poison before they could be held accountable.

Göring

SUICIDE IN PRISON

During the Nuremberg Trials, Hermann Göring was sentenced to death by hanging on 30th September 1946 for his war crimes. He didn't appeal, but requested to be executed by firing squad – a more honourable death for a soldier, he claimed. The request was denied. But when guards opened the door to his cell just hours before he was to be taken to the gallows, they found him dead. He had escaped execution by taking a cyanide pill. How Göring obtained the capsule remains a mystery.

Goebbels

MURDERED HIS FAMILY

On the evening of 1st May 1945, the day after Hitler's death, Magda and Joseph Goebbels committed suicide. Goebbels first shot his wife, then himself. A few hours earlier, the couple had ensured the murder of their six children, aged between four and 12. In the Führerbunker that afternoon, Magda had dressed the children in long, white nightgowns, brushed their hair, and sedated them with morphine. As they dozed in their beds, Hitler's physician, Ludwig Stumpfegger, killed them with cyanide capsules.

Himmler

BIT INTO POISON CAPSULE

As head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler was one of the main figures responsible for the extermination camps, where Jews and Roma were murdered in gas chambers, notably with Zyklon B – a cyanide-based gas. It was thus a grim irony that he chose to end his own life with cyanide. When it became clear that the war was lost, Himmler tried to flee but was captured by British forces on 23rd May 1945. While being examined by a military doctor, Himmler bit into a poison capsule hidden in his mouth and died.

» Kersten, in shooting from behind cover at poor creatures browsing on the edge of a wood, innocent, defenceless and unsuspecting? Properly considered, it's pure murder ... Every animal too has a right to live," Himmler declared, completely oblivious to the atrocities for which he himself was responsible.

Göring loved hunting and costume balls

Thanks to his affable, jovial manner, Hermann Göring was popular in many circles. Diplomats, cultural figures and businessmen loved his hunting parties and lavish gatherings, and caricaturists revelled in portraying the man with the seemingly ever-expanding girth and penchant for pomp, splendour and flamboyant uniforms. According to one of his closest aides, Göring changed his clothes up to five times a day, and while he might have been dressed in a medieval hunting outfit one moment, the next he might have appeared in a toga like a Roman emperor.

He often indulged so much in the luxuries of life that he neglected his duties. But when he received a phone call from Führer headquarters, he obediently snapped to attention. As hedonistic as he was, Göring was equally brutal as a politician. Throughout the 1930s, he ruthlessly manoeuvred his rivals out of the Nazi Party and ended up as its second-in-command, holding the title of Hitler's deputy.

Göring played a key role in the persecution of the Jews – nearly every law against them bore his signature. And when, in the summer of 1941, Göring gave the formal order for the *Endlösung* – the Final Solution – his name became forever linked to a massacre without historical precedent. By then, however, his star had already begun to fade in Hitler's eyes.

As leader of the German air force, the Luftwaffe, Göring had been lauded for its early blitzkrieg victories. But he failed to secure air supremacy in the Battle of Britain in 1940, despite promising Hitler otherwise. And when he was unable to establish an airlift to support the encircled German troops at Stalingrad in 1942, the Führer lost faith in his loyal marshal once and for all.

By this time, Göring had relapsed into morphine addiction. Contemporary accounts describe him taking up to 40 codeine pills containing morphine a day – five would knock an ordinary man out. In April 1945, Hitler expelled Göring from the party, and in disgrace, he was stripped of all his positions and arrested. As Göring's influence waned and he was sidelined, Heinrich Himmler and Joseph Goebbels rose in prominence within the Nazi hierarchy. Göring was forced to hand over responsibility for the persecution of the Jews to his arch-rival, Heinrich Himmler. And as Germany's military fortunes turned, Hitler reacted by granting even more power to the SS leader; in 1942, Himmler became minister of the interior and, the following year, commander of the Home Army.

Himmler betrayed Führer

Himmler continued to display deep loyalty to the Führer and even mimicked his language and gestures. But as the war neared its end and Germany lay defeated in the spring of 1945, he began to doubt Adolf Hitler. In secret, he attempted to negotiate peace with Britain and the United States, and seize power from the Führer. When the truth emerged in the final days of the Reich – on 28th April 1945 – Hitler, holed up in the Führerbunker in Berlin, turned deathly pale with rage. He could never have imagined that *"Der treue Heinrich"* – loyal Heinrich – would stab him in the back. "Himmler of all people, Himmler of all people!" he shouted in fury. Enraged, the Führer stripped Himmler of all titles, erased him from his will, and ordered his arrest.

Of the once-loyal triumvirate, only Goebbels remained by Hitler's side until the very end. On 30th April 1945, Hitler committed suicide in the Führerbunker, where propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and his wife had also taken refuge. In his will, Hitler named Goebbels his successor as chancellor, but Goebbels knew that all was lost. Hitler's fall was also his fall.

"Life ... for me personally has no further value if it cannot be used in the service of the Führer and by his side," the Nazi propagandist wrote in a note.

On 1st May 1945, Goebbels had a doctor kill his and Magda's six children in the Führerbunker. Then the couple dressed in formal clothes and went up to the garden above. There, Goebbels shot Magda before turning the gun on himself. □

The three top Nazis left millions of dead and a ruined empire in their wake.
SHUTTERSTOCK

In 1921, the Nazis organised a number of former soldiers into a new paramilitary corps, the SA. Over time, the ragtag army would become Germany's most powerful force.
BUNDESARCHIV

On his journey from insignificant party leader in Bavaria to Germany's Führer, Adolf Hitler received crucial help from one source – the brutal Brownshirts of the SA. From a small gang of thugs terrorising communists, the SA storm troopers became the Nazis' well-organised and violent vanguard.

Thug SECURED POWER

The small town of Bad Tölz in southern Bavaria is known for its spa resorts, picturesque medieval streets and idyllic Alpine views. But Tuesday 15th August 1922 was anything but idyllic. At midday, 18 young men entered the town. After a rowdy visit to the tavern Zum Oswaldbräu, the men marched noisily through the streets, waving a swastika banner and singing patriotic songs.

The group stopped when they reached the Jewish-owned Parkhotel and began chanting a marching song, ending each verse with the words "Out with the Jews". The words were no coincidence, as the Parkhotel was a popular restaurant among the town's Jewish middle class and several guests came outside to see what was happening. Soon after, the guests shouted "thugs" and waved their walking sticks at the group of unruly men, trying to stop the harassment. Eventually, the police had to separate the parties. If the guests and police thought the presence of law enforcement would make an impression on the young men, they quickly learnt otherwise.

"We'll be back, you'll see. Things will change," threatened the group's leader, Hans Ulrich Klintzsch, defiantly. He added that

army

the police had taken them in many times before, and they weren't afraid of being punished. It won't change us, he continued – on the contrary, "...we will become ever more fanatical". The threat would prove almost prophetic. The men were part of a small group of fanatical Nazis in the Sturmabteilung, or SA. As the Nazi Party's shock troops, the SA would become the driving force behind the violence, unrest and harassment that paved the way for Hitler's seizure of power a decade later.

Although the SA was originally created as a security force for Adolf Hitler, the hot-headed party leader wasn't the one who came up with the idea of a corps of violence-prone men to protect him and intimidate political enemies. A wide range of militias and local, semi-private armies, known as Freikorps, were active in Germany when Hitler formed the SA in 1921, appointing Hans Ulrich Klintzsch as its first leader.

Unemployed soldiers flocked to the Freikorps

The Freikorps were a direct consequence of Germany's defeat in World War I. After the horrors of the trenches ended, around six million German soldiers returned home – to unemployment »

» and economic hardship. Jobs were scarce, but the Freikorps – private paramilitary units – were eager to enlist war veterans. These units had been established after the war to guard the borders and help the German government suppress uprisings like the November Revolution in 1918-19, a left-wing revolt that led to the abdication of the German Kaiser.

Unrest and violence plagued Germany, and several small revolutions broke out in the years following the war. The number of militia soldiers protecting special interests grew rapidly. Historians estimate that by 1921, as many as 400,000 German men were enrolled in paramilitary groups. It was in this political landscape that the Nazis decided to establish their own force: the SA. The organisation was founded on 3rd August 1921 as the "Turn- und Sportabteilung" – a gymnastics and sports division of the Nazi Party. Despite its peaceful name, the Nazis made no secret of the fact that the division had little to do with sport.

An advert in the party newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* called on young men to sign up at their local party office, stating that the goal was, first and foremost, to instil an unbending will to act in their young supporters; that loyalty to one another would be encouraged, as well as obedience to the leader.

Just a month later, the sports division saw its first action. A small group of men flanked Hitler when he turned up at the Löwenbräukeller beer hall in Munich on 14th September 1921. While Otto Ballerstedt, one of Hitler's political rivals, was speaking, the Nazis stormed the hall and cut the power. When the lights came back on, Ballerstedt was lying on the floor, badly beaten and bleeding from a head wound. Hitler was questioned by police but showed no remorse.

"We got what we wanted. Ballerstedt did not speak," he stated coldly. Shortly afterwards, the organisation changed its name to *Sturmabteilung* – Storm Division – named after the storm troopers who had infiltrated and attacked enemy lines in small units during World War I.

Two months later, the Nazi storm troopers faced their first major trial by fire. When Hitler spoke at Munich's Hofbräuhaus on the evening of 4th November 1921, the audience was shown to their seats by young SA men. They all wore red armbands with a white circle and a black swastika. But they soon had more to worry about than guarding the doors. About 800 of the 2,000 attendees were socialists and workers who had come to protest.

Suddenly, the socialist slogan "freedom" rang out through the hall – and crockery started flying. "Three, four, five heavy stone pots flew within an inch of the speaker's [Hitler's] head," recalled witness Magdalena Schweyer. The bombardment quickly turned into a mass brawl with smashed steins, overturned tables and broken chair legs. After 25 minutes, the socialists were driven out, and the SA were hailed as the heroes of the evening.

Violent riots secure important attention

The episode received wide press coverage and gave the then insignificant Nazi Party attention it otherwise wouldn't have had. Many Germans, weary of poor economic conditions and post-war changes, admired the SA's decisiveness. The success had an effect. By the end of the year, party membership had grown to 4,100 – a modest number but double that of the previous year.

Over the next two years, small groups of SA members – such as Hans Ulrich Klintzsch's group in Bad Tölz – terrorised Jews and political opponents. Sometimes violence was a reaction to provocations, mainly from communists, but usually the SA deliberately provoked situations leading to clashes. A common tactic was to send two or three uniformed men followed by 50 »

"Death to Marxism." In the 1920s the storm troopers fought daily street battles against Germany's communists. The aim was to create fear and attention around the Nazi party.
GETTY IMAGES

HITLER

Ernst Röhm

Born: 28th November 1887 in Munich
Died: 1st July 1934 in Stadelheim Prison near Munich
Leader of SA: 5th January 1931 – 1st July 1934

Röhm became Hitler's watchdog – and arch enemy

War and conflict were the professional soldier Ernst Röhm's life, and he willingly offered his expertise and muscle power to his friend Hitler – until power and ambition tore them apart.

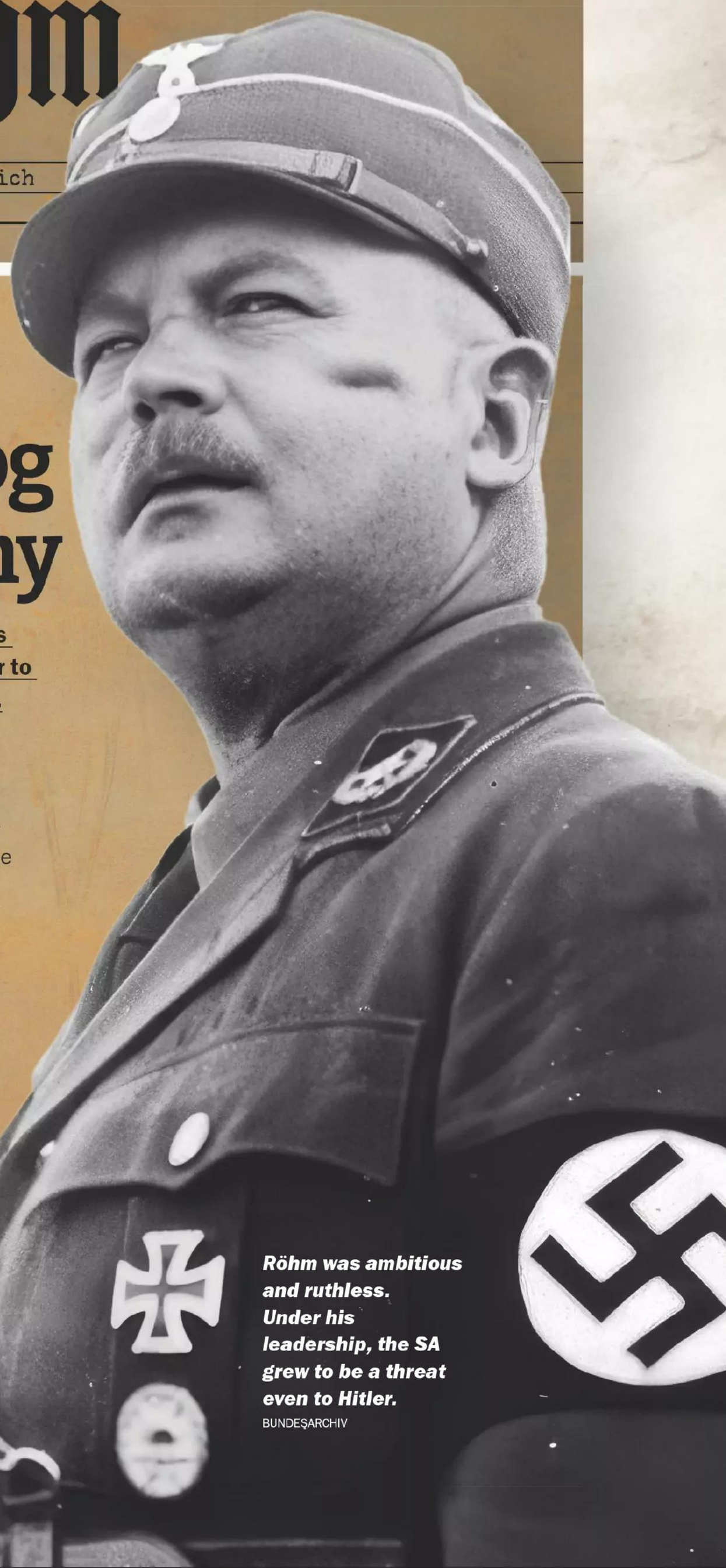
Son of a railway official, Ernst Röhm wasn't an obvious choice for a career in the German army. But when he enlisted in 1906, the 19-year-old man's fate was sealed. Röhm loved the soldier's life and showed such courage on the battlefield that during World War I he was awarded the Iron Cross First Class and reached the rank of captain.

Germany's defeat hit Röhm hard. He was discharged from the army and instead became interested in a number of the new parties that emerged in Germany after the war. He was among the founders of the DAP – a Nazi precursor – and one of the first members of Hitler's NSDAP, founded in 1920.

From the start, Röhm formed a close friendship with Hitler, offering to protect him by recruiting battle-ready men to join a personal guard corps for the Nazi leader – which became the SA.

With Röhm at the helm, the SA helped secure Hitler the post of chancellor. Röhm's growing power and ambition, however, became a threat and Hitler therefore decided to get rid of his old friend after seizing power in 1933.

On the dictator's orders, Ernst Röhm was shot in 1934. His well-known homosexuality was used by his foes in the party leadership as a reason for the purge of the SA leader.



Röhm was ambitious and ruthless. Under his leadership, the SA grew to be a threat even to Hitler.
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GETTY IMAGES

IDENTIFYING MARKS ON LAPEL
It clearly showed which division and group the SA member belonged to.

RANK WAS INDICATED
SA members were divided into five different rank orders. At the bottom were the storm troopers, who wore no symbol on the collar. Leaders, however, wore from one to four 'insignia' depending on their position in the hierarchy.

THE DAGGER
The dagger was a type used by Swiss soldiers in the 1500s. The Nazis originally wanted to use the same kind of dagger that the German Landsknechte wore back then, but they ended up confusing the two types.

ARMBAND
The iconic red armband with a large swastika on a white background was worn on the left upper arm.

SA shirt was on sale

In 1923, Nazi Gerhard Rossbach received an offer he couldn't refuse. A batch of surplus brown shirts from the German colonies in Africa was being sold at a bargain price. Shortly after, the SA had its first uniform.

Members of the SA didn't wear uniforms when they first marched through Germany's streets in 1921; only a red armband with a swastika distinguished Hitler's storm troopers from the rest of the population.

That changed in 1923 when loyal Hitler supporter and former officer Gerhard Rossbach received a good offer from the German army. After World War I, the army was left with a batch of brown uniforms intended for German soldiers in East Africa. Being sold cheaply, Rossbach seized the opportunity, and the light brown, mother-of-pearl-buttoned shirts were immediately popular with the SA.

As soon as the original batch sold out, more were produced. From 1931, a new, darker model was sewn by the clothing manufacturer Hugo Boss. Recently bankrupt, the company was revived when owner Hugo Ferdinand Boss joined the party and secured the order through his contacts.

» to 60 SA members in civilian clothes marching through Munich's working-class districts. If the uniformed men were attacked, their anonymous comrades would jump out and assault the attackers.

In August 1922, Nazis attacked a shop owner in Munich for insisting on removing anti-Semitic pamphlets from his window. Although police arrested several SA members, only one was convicted and sentenced to just one week in prison.

Despite the light punishment, the Nazis saw themselves as victims of both political opponents and the German authorities' efforts to maintain law, order and democratic rules.

Ernst Röhm, later leader of the SA, noted that if Adolf Hitler wouldn't give up teaching his people, he would have to meet others' violence with his clenched fist.

Hitler ordered the violence stopped – on paper

SA often marched in their characteristic brown uniforms simply to demonstrate their power; for example, 500 SA men flooded the streets during the "German Days" in the Bavarian town of Coburg. This show of strength was meant to convince people that the Nazis were a political force that the public and established politicians had to reckon with. The corps was given the same role during the Beer Hall Putsch, which Hitler launched on 8th November 1923. Around 600 SA men surrounded the beer hall.

The following day, as the Nazis marched through Munich's streets, Ernst Röhm and other leading SA men stood by Hitler's side. However, the coup failed, and Hitler ended up in prison. Both the NSDAP and SA seemed destined for a quiet death and to fade into obscurity. But that wasn't to be. When Hitler was released after nine months in prison, the party and SA returned stronger. The prison stay made Hitler determined to gain power in Germany; this time, however, it would not be by coup but by peaceful means. The SA was no longer allowed to carry weapons but was to be solely a propaganda body and training institution for young party members, he declared.

Hitler's disavowal of violence meant little in practice. The SA was still ordered and encouraged to intimidate political opponents with violence, but the party's official stance gave Hitler and other senior Nazis the chance to distance themselves from the SA when convenient. Meanwhile, street fights and assaults continued as before. Nazi leaders privately made no secret of the SA's role.

Shortly after being appointed local party leader in Berlin in 1926, Joseph Goebbels noted how he took part in the SA muster. He said that everyone was in good shape so they could begin the important work and that attack followed attack and blood flowed.

Unrest and riots were to pave the way

The SA was ready for battle. During *Blutmai* (Bloody May), communists and Nazis clashed in Berlin in May 1929, resulting in at least 32 dead and 200 wounded. On 17 July 1932, unrest broke out when 6,000 SA men marched through the socialist enclave in the Hamburg suburb of Altona. During the march, communists shot and killed two SA men. The killings led to mass brawls, and during the turmoil a further 16 people were killed as the police tried to restore peace and order.

The fights, which involved knives, pistols and rubber truncheons, served as a release for growing frustrations among the young in crisis-ridden Germany. But the violence also served another purpose for the Nazis. Although Hitler sought to be highly visible during the election campaigns, it wasn't possible »

Ernst Röhm saw himself as the true leader of the Nazi party in 1933. Behind the scenes, Heinrich Himmler, among others, was planning how to remove the SA leader.
BUNDESARCHIV

» to be everywhere. The SA's demonstrations of power gained attention and ensured that the Nazis were constantly mentioned in the newspapers. At the same time the violence gave the impression that Germany was on the brink of collapse and that the sitting government was incompetent. "Disturbance is the main thing – never mind how it arises," stated a kreisleiter, a local party leader in the town of Hameln in 1931.

Young men joined in their droves

Meanwhile young men flocked to the SA. The corps, which in January consisted of 77,000 members, had swollen to 221,000 by the end of the same year. The following summer the number was 445,000.

The growth was partly due to a sharp rise in unemployment following the stock market crash in New York in 1929. In hungry Germany the SA offered poor men food and shelter.

"The corps' solidarity and comradeship gave them support, and their poor and empty lives gained content and meaning," wrote Röhm, who was appointed leader of the SA in January 1931.

Röhm, a war-scarred veteran of World War I, was ruthless in his leadership of the SA. During the first year under his command, thousands were injured or killed as a result of political violence.

In just one month before the election on 31st July 1932, 99 people were killed and 1,125 wounded during clashes between Nazis and their political enemies across Germany. The bloodshed made its impact. The election was a resounding success for the Nazis, who for the first time became the largest party in the legislative assembly.

Even in the former "red Berlin" the NSDAP made strong gains. In fact the Nazis gained more votes than any other party, and the share almost doubled from 15 to 29 per cent. In January 1933 Paul von Hindenburg, Germany's president, appointed Hitler chancellor. The SA corps under Röhm had grown to become an important power factor. Not only did the storm trooper army now number several million battle-ready men, the organisation had also formally been given command of the growing Hitler Youth, the Nazi party's popular youth organisation.

Röhm made no secret of the fact that he largely regarded Hitler's election victory as down to the SA and that he believed the corps deserved a prominent role in the Third Reich. First of all the SA should be put on an equal footing with the army.

"The Reichswehr is the instrument of national defence against external threats – the SA is the bearer of will and ideas of the National Socialist revolution within," he said in the pamphlet *The National Socialist Revolution and the SA*, which was published in June 1934.

By then Röhm's and the SA's days were numbered. Röhm's ambitions threatened Hitler, who feared that the unpolished Röhm and his army of rootless, working class young men would deter the business world and big capital – which Hitler needed to realise his dreams of a new mighty Germany.

So, on 30th June 1934, Hitler carried out a purge of the SA leadership in an operation known as the Night of the Long Knives. Many of the SA leadership were arrested and executed, including Röhm, who was shot on direct orders from Hitler.

The corps had played out its role, and although it wasn't formally dissolved, its influential role was over. By the end of the war, the SA was considered so insignificant that the military tribunal at Nuremberg refused to categorise the corps as a criminal organisation. After the Night of the Long Knives SA members had been "reduced to the status of a group of unimportant Nazi hangers-on," the court concluded. □

After the conflict with the SA, Himmler and Hitler became the most powerful men in the Nazi party. Behind them stood the SS corps, which from then on was tasked with crushing external and internal enemies.

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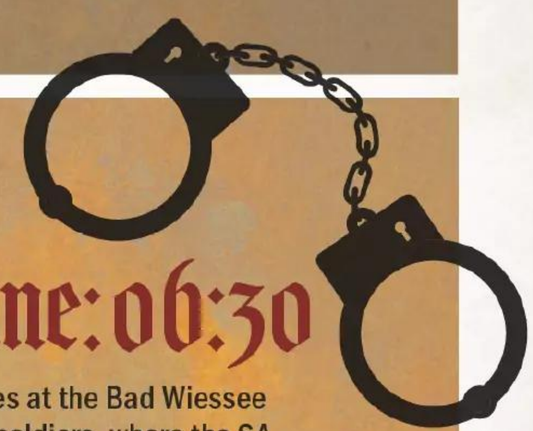
Hitler cleans house

When Adolf Hitler took office as Germany's chancellor in January 1933, total power was within reach. Only one obstacle stood in the way – Ernst Röhm and his powerful storm troopers. Therefore, Hitler and his henchmen planned a purge of the SA leadership to crush the group's power for good.



28th June 1934

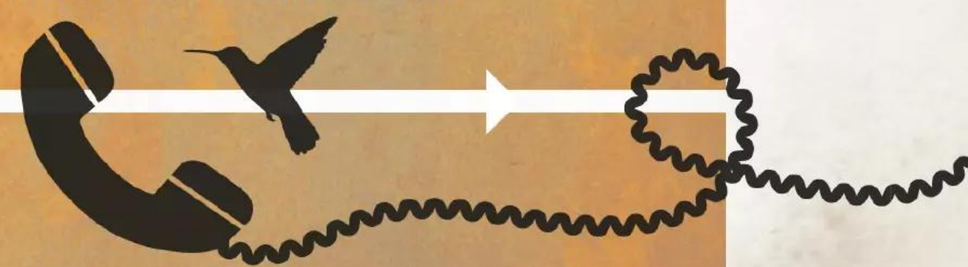
During a telephone call, Heinrich Himmler warns Hitler that the SA leader, Ernst Röhm,is planning to overthrow him in a coup. Hitler immediately decides to crack down on the SA.

30th June 1934

Hitler cuts short a visit to Westphalia and flies in the middle of the night to Munich to remove the SA leadership, who are holding a weekend meeting at a hotel near the city.

30th June: 06:30

At 06:30, Hitler arrives at the Bad Wiessee resort flanked by SS soldiers, where the SA leadership is gathered. Here, Hitler personally arrests SA chief of staff Ernst Röhm.



Morning

During the morning, SA's leading men are arrested by SS men and transported to Stadelheim prison outside Munich. The only exception is Edmund Heines, Röhm's deputy, who is found in bed with a young man. Hitler orders him to be shot immediately.

Late morning

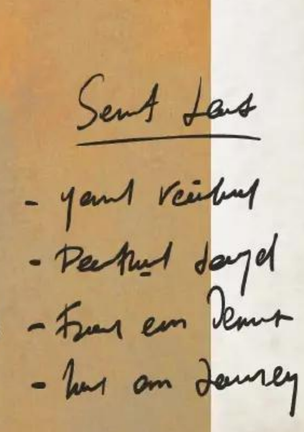
At 10:00, Hitler calls Göring, who is in Berlin. He gives the prearranged code word – kolibri – as a signal that the wider purge can begin.

Afternoon

During the day, SS men, Gestapo and Göring's private police attack Hitler's political opponents in Berlin and 20 other cities. Among those killed aren't just senior SA members, but also priests, politicians and officials. Executions of the SA leaders begin in Stadelheim prison.

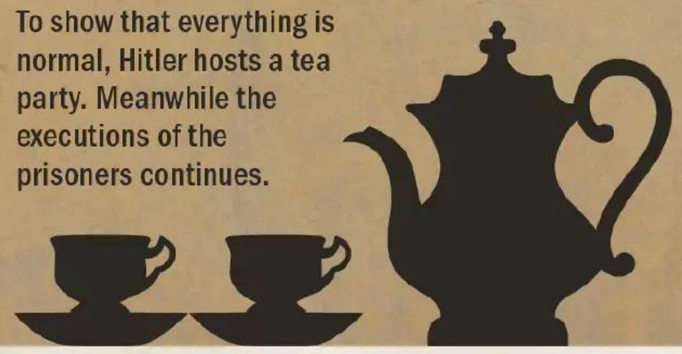
Evening

Hitler arrives in Berlin. At the airport, he is met by Göring and Himmler. Together, the three men review the list of those executed and imprisoned.



1st July

To show that everything is normal, Hitler hosts a tea party. Meanwhile the executions of the prisoners continues.



2nd July

At 04.00 the final shots of the purge ring out. At least 85 – and probably many more – have been executed to pave the way for Hitler's unlimited power.

13th July

In a speech to the Reichstag, Hitler justifies the purges by referring to the SA's plan to carry out a coup. He takes responsibility for the action, which is widely supported by both the army and the population. Seven days later, Hitler frees the SS from SA control.

***(1)** The Nazi Party offices helped organise community workdays **(2)** and counted votes during the pro forma elections that were still held across the Reich. **(3)** They also recorded the addresses of Jews and dissenters, making it easy for the Gestapo to find them.*

Party staff BECAME HITLER'S ENFORCERS

Nazi Party offices were scattered across Germany. From there, office clerks and party officials monitored citizens while organising communal meals and Sunday theatre in service of the party. Hundreds of thousands of men and women were the cogs in the machine that kept the Nazi dictatorship running.

In 1930s Germany, privacy was in short supply. Everything citizens did – from their job and newspaper subscriptions to who came calling at their home – was recorded on small brown index cards by the Nazi Party's thousands of office clerks. These cards were then stored in well-ordered boxes and could be retrieved in an instant if someone came under suspicion and needed further investigation.

As the years went by, the shelves at local Nazi Party offices grew ever more crowded. Even the most loyal party member could expect regular visits from the Führer's clerks and their meddlesome foot soldiers – the block wardens or block leaders. These were party-loyal men tasked with monitoring a 'block', or area of a town, and noting down whatever they could learn about the local residents.

"We never knew when our Block Leader would come nosing around," one woman recounted. "We only knew that sooner or later he would."

The woman was far from alone in being closely monitored by the Nazi Party's office network. Offices were scattered throughout Germany, and surveillance was ubiquitous. By the late 1930s, Germany was home to tens of thousands of so-called *Ortsgruppen* (local branches). These small local offices not only helped the party tighten its grip on power but also drew ordinary Germans deeper into the world of Nazism. These offices served as outposts for both propaganda and control – tools to win hearts while keeping watch over every citizen, even the most devoted.

Every town must have a party office

The first small party offices began appearing after Hitler made a decisive choice in 1925. Newly released from prison, he resolved to transform the Nazi Party from a revolutionary movement into an organisation that would seize power legally. With only 25,000 members in a nation of over 60 million, the goal seemed distant – but Hitler and his inner circle devised an ambitious plan: a network of local party offices would be spread across the country from rural villages to major cities to recruit followers through meetings, events and propaganda. By engaging directly with voters, the staff and volunteers at these offices could take charge of everything from party rallies to community get-togethers – helping Germans fall in love with the party and its vision.

Hitler proceeded methodically, dividing Germany into 33 regions identical to the Reichstag's electoral districts. These he called *Gaue* – an old medieval term for regions. Each *Gau* was led by a powerful Gauleiter, who acted as Hitler's regional representative. Several would go on to become major figures in the Third Reich – including Propaganda Minister Joseph »

» Goebbels, who took the influential post of Gauleiter in Berlin in 1926.

Beneath the Gauleiters were the *Ortsgruppen* – local party branches that formed the essential cogs in the Nazi machine. Each *Ortsgruppe* was broken down into smaller units – *Zellen* (cells) and *Blöcke* (blocks) – each overseen by the ever-present block warden. It was within this tightly woven surveillance network that the Nazis began to earn the trust and obedience of the German public. The Nazis literally had a man on every street corner.

This proximity paid off. When the Wall Street Crash of 1929 triggered an economic collapse, bringing hunger and misery to Germany, frustrated voters knew exactly where to go. At the nearby Nazi office, they could curse the government and get a hot meal during hard times. As a result, the party's membership ballooned rapidly – and by the time the Nazis won the Reichstag election in 1933, they were able to march straight into the halls of power and begin their reign of terror.

Block wardens kept files on everyone

Once Hitler seized power, the role of the party offices changed. Before 1933, their task had been to recruit voters and members. Now, they became instruments of control and surveillance – and the block warden became a key figure in the Third Reich.

At their peak, there were 200,000 block wardens across Germany, each responsible for monitoring a small area of a town, city or rural community. In addition to maintaining the party register and collecting membership dues, the block warden was required to compile and update a household register.

This involved recording detailed information about every single resident in his block. He carefully noted each person's age and place of work – and of course whether or not they were party members. The index card also included a field for comments, where the warden could add crucial notes – for example, whether the household was loyal to Hitler (regardless of party affiliation), or whether it warranted a visit from one of the office's propaganda officers.

These meticulous records were used, among other things, to recruit children for the Hitler Youth, and to identify those seen as having potential for *Führernachwuchs* – boys and girls who might one day be admitted to elite Adolf Hitler Schools and groomed as future leaders of the Nazi movement. But the block warden's real strength lay in his ability to uncover enemies of the party. For that, close contact with every citizen was essential – and the inquisitive wardens often paid surprise visits to their neighbours.

"Rightly understood, the duties of a cell or block warden are far more important and far broader. Their primary task is to anchor the party members of their cell or block ever more firmly to the party, and to win those who live in their cell or block more and more to National Socialist thinking," read an article from »

Culture came under control

Max Amann (1891-1957), President of the Reich Press Chamber and Reich Leader for the Press:

Amann oversaw the press on behalf of the Reich and had the power to shut down newspapers critical of the regime. He owned Germany's largest publishing house and was responsible for the party's publications – including Hitler's manifesto *Mein Kampf*.

BUNDESARCHIV

Party offices usually took care of peaceful arrangements. Violence was left to Hitler's willing enforcers in the SA.

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Figures show that close to 30,000 party offices were scattered across the German landscape – from major cities to tiny hamlets.

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Party offices sprang up

The Nazi Party established a national presence across Germany during the 1920s. By the time Hitler became chancellor in 1933, the party machine was already a well-oiled operation – with an office in almost every town.

When Bavarian authorities lifted the ban on the NSDAP in 1925, Adolf Hitler and his followers were free to rebuild the Nazi Party. With a clear strategy to gain power legally, they launched a vast organisational drive, dividing Germany into hundreds of administrative units – each with its own party office tasked with recruiting and retaining members.

This structure expanded steadily even before the 1933 seizure of power. Once party and state were fused under Hitler, the offices became essential for building support and carrying out Nazi policy. At the top were the *Gaue* – large regional divisions aligned with Reichstag constituencies – but the real engine of daily operations lay in the *Ortsgruppen*, the small local offices that oversaw one or more communities in towns and rural areas alike. Their presence ensured direct contact with citizens and made the Nazi presence impossible to ignore – often marked by a prominent swastika flag flying from the office façade.

By 1939, the number of *Ortsgruppen* had exploded to 28,376 nationwide, reflecting the party's massive growth. In Munich – birthplace of Nazism and home to the first *Ortsgruppe* – more than 100 such local offices were in operation, showing just how fast the organisation had spread.

» 1935 on the duties of block wardens and their importance as a means of contacting all German society.

Newspaper subscriptions and party flags earned plus points

The block warden was also responsible for distributing propaganda materials. According to a party circular, he was to keep track of "when the *Völkischer Beobachter* [Nazi Party newspaper] was subscribed to [and] whether the family already possessed a swastika flag before the 1935 flag law".

Party offices also organised special evening gatherings, where residents were treated to ideologically uplifting lectures and light entertainment. For example, on 9th November 1934, residents of a block in Deutenhausen, Bavaria, were invited to attend an "interesting" lecture on the Saarland – a territory lost after World War I that Germany hoped to reclaim. The evening continued with orchestral music and concluded with a *Sieg Heil* salute to the Führer and a rousing rendition of the *Deutschlandlied*. Note-takers duly recorded who was present, and the event offered a convenient opportunity to question attendees about their opinions and daily habits. The party offices also played a central role in the *Winterhilfswerk des Deutschen Volkes* – Winter Relief of the German People – an aid organisation founded at Hitler's behest in 1933 under the slogan "no one shall be hungry, no one shall freeze". Ostensibly established to help those hardest hit by the economic crisis, it relied heavily on the data gathered by the offices.

Armed with their card indexes, party officials, SA men, Hitler Youth members and other volunteers would go door to door, collection tins in hand, asking for money or clothing to support the poor. The offices also boosted donations by hosting *Eintopfsonntage* – Stew Sundays – during the winter months. On these days, block residents would gather to eat a simple dish, such as pea stew with pigs' ears, one of the meals officially endorsed by the party. The block warden would dutifully collect a 50 pfennig donation from each participant – an amount far higher than the cost of the ingredients. The party offices didn't just record who paid – they also noted who failed to attend.

Another key duty involved the elections and plebiscites that continued to be held even after Hitler had seized power. Though the results were predetermined, the votes helped maintain the illusion that the German people still had a say. They also gave local offices a chance to demonstrate how thoroughly their community supported the Führer and the party. In the run-up to elections,

Party offices handled all aspects of people's lives

Party offices ensured they got close to the German people by arranging everything from election days to communal meals. As the war progressed, their role shifted – handing out ration cards and acting as informants.

HOUSEHOLD REGISTRATION

Staff at the local party office were responsible for recording every household and its residents in their assigned area – including how many people lived in each building and what they did for work. These records formed the basis for reports to the Gestapo, recruitment to the Hitler Youth and the systematic extermination of Germany's Jews.

SOCIAL EVENINGS

When Germans attended political lectures or local theatre performances, it was often the party office behind the scenes. Sunday in the Third Reich was frequently spent at a political lecture followed by light entertainment. Once a month during the winter, the office also hosted communal meals – the so-called *Eintopfsonntage*.

ELECTION ASSISTANCE

Even though Hitler ruled as a dictator, elections and referendums continued – designed to show how popular he was. In the run-up to a vote, party offices distributed leaflets with the date and time, then on the day itself, officials and volunteers watched the voter rolls and ensured as many people as possible took part – whether they wanted to or not.

FOOD AID

Shortly after World War II broke out, the Nazis introduced ration cards to ensure fair distribution of scarce goods. Party officials handed out the cards – and made sure single mothers and war widows, who worked during the day, had access to food by staying open outside normal hours.

Culture came under control

Benno von Arent (1898–1956), Reich Stage Designer:

From his Berlin office, Benno von Arent and his staff were responsible for staging grand parades and party rallies. These events were not only racially vetted but crafted to show Nazism as a powerful and superior ideology.

BUNDESARCHIV

party functionaries or block wardens delivered leaflets announcing the vote. They often gave a brief rehearsed speech explaining why the election was vital for the people and the Fatherland. Households whose loyalty was marked as questionable in the office's files were targeted for additional visits from party propagandists, who were instructed to be persistent. For instance, they were required to approach anyone who failed to answer the door at least three times. Persistence was especially evident when it came to voter turnout. One of the *Ortsgruppe's* duties was the *Wahlschleppdienst* – the physical escort of reluctant voters. Illness was not accepted as a valid excuse. If someone failed to appear at the polling station, the block warden would question them in detail about the nature and duration of their illness. It was up to the warden to decide whether the person was too unwell to vote.

Those judged healthy enough were collected by car – driven by volunteers who had signed up in advance to provide the shuttle service.

The Gestapo was the block warden's best friend

The party clerks' constant snooping and interference made them widely disliked – and for some, the consequences went far beyond mere irritation. The Nazi offices' records were eagerly used by the Gestapo, which worked closely with the block wardens. This arrangement contributed to the arrest and torture of thousands of communists, Social Democrats and other political opponents, who were sent to prison or concentration camps. But the most devastating consequences of this bureaucratic surveillance »

Communal dining made its way on to the Third Reich menu. The Nazis charged for meals – and noted who failed to attend.

GETTY IMAGES

Nazism's manifesto

In 1925, Hitler decided that the Nazi Party – no longer a revolutionary organisation – would now pursue power legally, above all through the creation of a vast party apparatus. He then set out the party's new vision for Germany in a 25-point programme.

Programm der National-Sozialistischen Deutschen Arbeiter-Partei

Das Programm der Nationalsozialistischen Deutschen Arbeiterpartei ist ein Zeit-Programm. Die Führer lehnen es ab, nach Erreichung der im Programm aufgestellten Ziele neue aufzustellen, nur zu dem Zweck, um durch künstlich gesteigerte Unzufriedenheit der Massen das Fortbestehen der Partei zu ermöglichen.

1 Wir fordern den Zusammenschluß aller Deutschen auf Grund des Selbstbestimmungsrechtes der Völker zu einem Groß-Deutschland.

2 Wir fordern die Gleichberechtigung des Deutschen Volkes gegenüber den anderen Nationen, Aufhebung der Friedensverträge von Versailles und St. Germain.

3 Wir fordern Land und Boden (Kolonien) zur Ernährung unseres Volkes und Ansiedlung unseres Bevölkerungsüberschusses.

4 Staatsbürger kann nur der sein, wer Volksgenosse ist. Volksgenosse kann nur sein, wer deutschen Blutes ist, ohne Rücksicht auf Konfession. Kein Jude kann daher Volksgenosse sein.

5 Wer nicht Staatsbürger ist, soll nur als Gast in Deutschland leben können und muß unter Fremden-Gesetzgebung stehen.

6 Das Recht, über Führung und Gesetze des Staates zu bestimmen, darf nur dem Staatsbürger zustehen. Daher fordern wir, daß jedes öffentliche Amt, gleichgültig welcher Art, gleich ob im Reich, Land oder Gemeinde, nur durch Staatsbürger bekleidet werden darf. Wir bekämpfen die korrumpierende Parlamentswirtschaft einer Stellenbesetzung nur nach Parteigesichtspunkten ohne Rücksicht auf Charakter und Fähigkeiten.

7 Wir fordern, daß sich der Staat verpflichtet, in erster Linie für die Erwerbs- und Lebensmöglichkeit der Staatsbürger zu sorgen. Wenn es nicht möglich ist, die Gesamtbevölkerung des Staates zu ernähren, so sind die Angehörigen fremder Nationen (Nicht-Staatsbürger) aus dem Reiche auszuweisen.

8 Jede weitere Einwanderung Nicht-Deutscher ist zu verhindern. Wir fordern, daß alle Nicht-Deutschen, die seit 2. August 1914 in Deutschland eingewandert sind, sofort zum Verlassen des Reiches gezwungen werden.

9 Alle Staatsbürger müssen gleiche Rechte und Pflichten besitzen.

10 Erste Pflicht jedes Staatsbürgers muß sein, geistig oder körperlich zu schaffen. Die Tätigkeit des Einzelnen darf nicht gegen die Interessen der Allgemeinheit verstoßen, sondern muß im Rahmen des Gesamten zum Nutzen Aller erfolgen.

Daher fordern wir:

11 Abschaffung des arbeits- und mühelosen Einkommens.
Brechung der Zinsknechtschaft.

12 Im Hinblick auf die ungeheuren Opfer an Gut und Blut, die jeder Krieg vom Volke fordert, muß die persönliche Bereicherung durch den Krieg als Verbrechen am Volke bezeichnet werden. Wir fordern daher restlose Einziehung aller Kriegsgewinne.

13 Wir fordern die Verstaatlichung aller (bisher) bereits vergesellschafteten Betriebe (Trusts).

14 Wir fordern Gewinnbeteiligung an Großbetrieben.

15 Wir fordern einen großzügigen Ausbau der Altersversorgung.

16 Wir fordern die Schaffung eines gesunden Mittelstandes und seine Erhaltung, sofortige Kommunalisierung der Groß-Warenhäuser und ihre Vermietung zu billigen Preisen an kleine Gewerbetreibende, schärfste Berücksichtigung aller kleinen Gewerbetreibenden bei Lieferung an den Staat, die Länder oder Gemeinden.

17 Wir fordern eine unseren nationalen Bedürfnissen angepaßte Bodenreform, Schaffung eines Gesetzes zur unentgeltlichen Enteignung von Boden für gemeinnützige Zwecke, Abschaffung des Bodenzinses und Verhinderung jeder Bodenspekulation.

18 Wir fordern den rücksichtslosen Kampf gegen diejenigen, die durch ihre Tätigkeit das Gemeininteresse schädigen. Gemeine Volksverbrecher, Wucherer, Schieber usw. sind mit dem Tode zu bestrafen, ohne Rücksichtnahme auf Konfession und Rasse.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

When the party platform was unveiled, it was made clear that only Germans should be allowed to vote – a bizarre demand, since Hitler at the time did not hold German citizenship.

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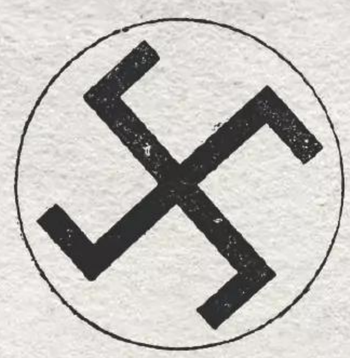

WE DEMAND THE CREATION OF A GREATER GERMANY

1 The Greater German nation was to include states with a significant population of German speakers – such as Austria, the Sudetenland and parts of Poland.

WE WILL ABOLISH THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES

2 The Treaty of Versailles, signed after World War I, imposed heavy reparations and banned Germany from rearming. The Nazis promised to overturn it.

WE WANT COLONIES

3 Germany lost all its colonies after World War I. The Nazis demanded new lands for its population.

WE WILL RESTRICT CITIZENSHIP

4 Only people of "German blood" could be citizens. Jews, therefore, were excluded from the national community.

WE WILL TREAT NON-CITIZENS DIFFERENTLY

5 Non-citizens were to be treated as guests. They were considered representatives of foreign powers and not protected under German law.

WE WILL RESTRICT THE RIGHT TO VOTE

6 Only citizens should have the right to vote. No non-citizen could be elected to public office.

WE WILL PUT GERMAN CITIZENS FIRST

7 The German state should serve its own people first. As not everyone could be supported, non-citizens were to be excluded from the Reich.

WE WILL HALT IMMIGRATION

8 All immigration to Germany should stop. Every non-German who entered the country after 2nd August 1914 was to leave immediately.

ALL CITIZENS MUST BE EQUAL

9 Every citizen was to have equal rights and bear equal duties. These rights would not apply to non-citizens.

EVERYONE MUST WORK

10 Work was the citizen's most important duty. Labour should serve the common good.

PASSIVE INCOME MUST BE ABOLISHED

11 Germans should no longer earn money simply by owning land or charging interest. This policy aimed to protect citizens from spiralling debt.

PROFITEERING FROM WAR MUST BE BANNED

12 Profiting from war through arms sales, black-market dealings or related business ventures was to be outlawed. All profits from such trade would be confiscated.

WE WILL NATIONALISE LARGE BUSINESSES

13 Large corporations were to be nationalised – especially monopolistic or cartel-like conglomerates.

PROFITS MUST BE SHARED

14 Profits from wholesale trade were to be confiscated. Middlemen's profits were to be redistributed.

WE WILL INCREASE OLD AGE PENSIONS

15 Germany's post-war economic crisis had eroded support for the elderly. The Nazis promised to reverse this.

WE DEMAND A STRONG MIDDLE CLASS

16 Large department stores were to be broken up and their units leased to small businesses. Smaller firms were also to be prioritised in public sector contracts.

WE WANT TO REFORM LAND LAWS

17 Sweeping reforms would allow the state to expropriate land for public use. Land rents would be abolished and property speculation banned.

WE WANT TO EXPAND THE USE OF THE DEATH PENALTY

18 Until this point, capital punishment had been reserved for specific types of murder. The Nazis proposed extending it to include profiteers and lenders who charged high interest rates.

WE WANT TO MAKE THE LAW MORE GERMAN

19 The Nazis believed the law – inherited from the Roman Empire – was too focused on individual rights. They wanted to replace it with laws rooted in German tradition and interpreted by the courts.

WE WANT TO OVERHAUL THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

20 Germans' level of education was to be raised. Understanding of the state would be instilled in children from an early age.

WE WANT TO IMPROVE THE YOUNG'S HEALTH

21 Children and young people's physical health was to be improved. To that end, compulsory gymnastics and sport would be introduced in schools.

WE WANT TO BAN MERCENARIES AND BUILD A NATIONAL ARMY

22 Under the Treaty of Versailles, the German army had been limited to 100,000 men. The Nazis aimed to rearm and create a large, unified force.

WE WILL REGULATE THE PRESS

23 Only people of the German "race" were permitted to work in journalism. Foreign newspapers were banned from publishing in German, and any press not serving the common good could be banned.

WE WILL INTRODUCE FREEDOM OF RELIGION

24 Freedom of belief was allowed – but only so long as the religion did not harm "the Germanic race". This clause explicitly excluded Jews.

WE WANT A STRONG STATE

25 To implement this programme, a strong state was required. The Nazis therefore demanded a centralised authority with unlimited power over the Reich and its institutions.

SHUTTERSTOCK

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Christmas aid also became a party task. Every year, the* Winterhilfswerk *ensured that poor families received food and gifts during the holidays.

» were reserved for Germany's Jews. Local party offices did not merely register Jews – they also willingly provided staff and support for actions targeting Jewish citizens. This included the boycott of Jewish-owned shops and businesses on 1st April 1933, just three months after Hitler took power – the first time that the party's meticulous bookkeeping would play a decisive role.

The boycott was led by Julius Streicher, publisher of the violently anti-Semitic *Der Stürmer* weekly newspaper. In order to know exactly which shops to target with SA troops, Streicher had the party offices identify and register Jewish businesses and report their details to him. These records formed the first detailed survey of Germany's Jewish population and allowed the SA to conduct an efficient and aggressive blockade of storefronts in April 1933. It would not be the last time.

Jewish account books revealed collaborators

When Nazi supporters and collaborators rampaged through Germany during *Kristallnacht* – the Night of Broken Glass – from 9th to 10th November 1938, murdering hundreds of Jews and destroying thousands of homes and synagogues, the party offices once again proved their worth. This time, their staff were tasked with sealing off the homes from which Jews had just been driven. Afterwards, the block wardens reported the vacated properties to the municipal housing office, rendering the displaced Jews officially homeless. They also collected the keys and belongings, which were brought to the local party office for safekeeping.

There, the block wardens and their assistants went through the possessions, looking for account books or any other documents that might reveal business contacts. Germans identified as having collaborated with Jews were publicly named and shamed. Following *Kristallnacht*, the persecution of Jews became systematised. Local offices were now ordered to monitor the remaining Jewish residents in their districts even more closely – and to record any change of address. In this way, the Nazi regime could keep track of precisely where every Jewish family lived in case that information was needed later.

One result was that block wardens were now required to carry out a formal headcount of the Jewish residents in their area four times a year. These reports were sent directly to the Nazi authorities – and when the Gestapo and SS began the deportation of German Jews in 1941, they were able to locate their victims quickly and efficiently using the local lists. The brutal fate of these Jews is clearly reflected in the preserved protocols of local party offices. For example, cell leaders from Cell 08 in Dornbusch – a district of Frankfurt am Main – recorded six Jewish residents living in the area ahead of the Frankfurt deportations in October 1941.

In the months that followed, the office documented their removal. In March 1943, the cell leader noted that "the last two male Jews still residing in Cell 08 have been picked up". A year later, in March 1944, the last remaining Jewish woman in Cell 08 died. Her death allowed the cell leader to declare, with evident satisfaction, that the Nazi objective of the *Endlösung* – the total extermination of Jewry – had been achieved in his district.

"The last Jewish resident in Cell 08 has died, and the area is now *judenrein* (free of Jews)," he wrote.

By the time the cell leader recorded this chilling note in March 1944, Germany was already close to defeat in World War II.

Clerks fought to the bitter end

Ten days after the German troops invaded Poland on 1st September 1939, the message sounded to party clerks to hold the home front. And with good reason. Since its earliest days, the Nazi Party had claimed that Germany only lost World War I because the home front lost the will to fight – and stabbed the front-line soldiers in the back. That had to be prevented at all

Culture came under control

Hans-Friedrich Blunck (1888-1961), President of the Reich Literature Chamber:

Blunck's office was responsible for the Nazification of German literature. He also founded the *Stiftung Deutsches Auslandswerk* – an organisation designed to promote Nazi propaganda abroad.

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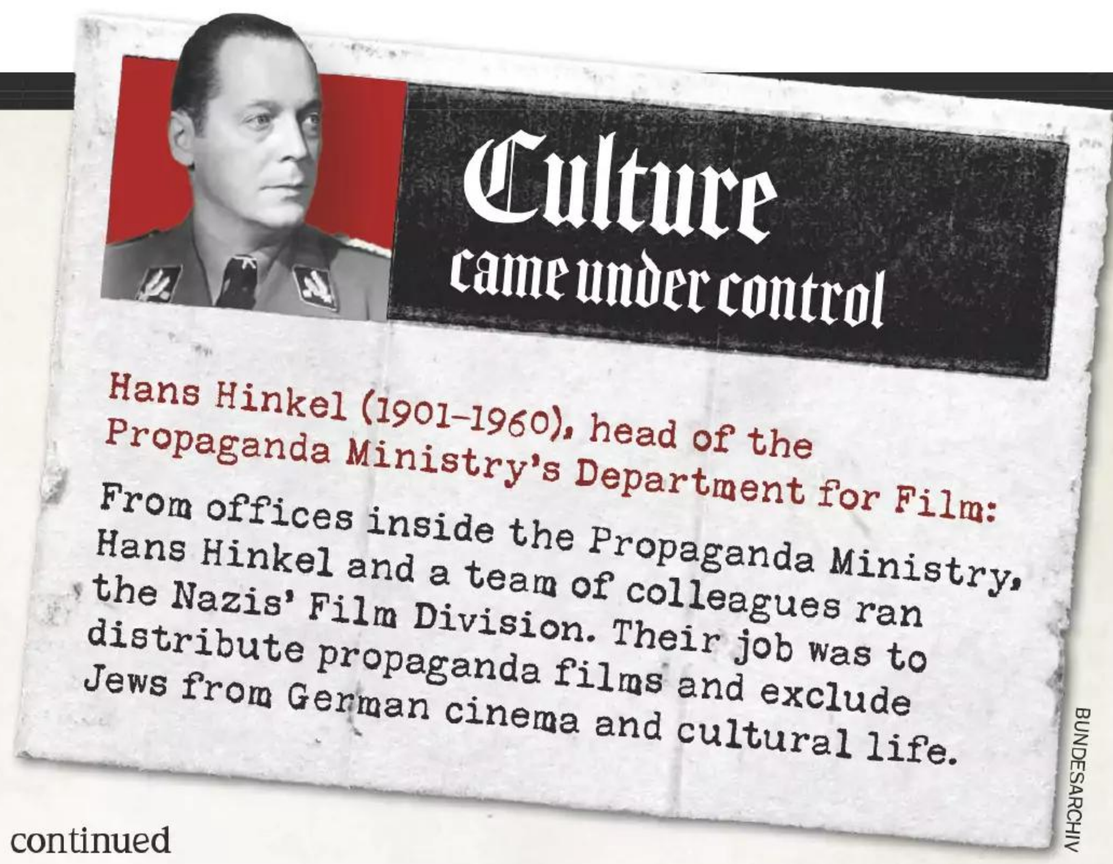
costs this time. To secure popular support for the war, the sprawling network of party offices proved invaluable.

In the early years of the conflict, the clerks were tasked with ensuring that the civilian populace accepted all hardships and deprivations, as one circular described it. Block wardens worked hard to demonstrate the regime's care for the average German. Together with other party officials and volunteers, they handed out ration cards for essential foodstuffs and assisted single women and war widows in obtaining supplies. They also cleared snow, organised timber cutting for fuel and allocated vegetable plots to help stretch increasingly scarce provisions.

As the Allies systematically rained tonnes of bombs down on to German cities in the later years of the war, party offices mobilised air defence volunteers and arranged shelter for the homeless. The workload became ever heavier as the war dragged on – particularly the grim duty of delivering news of front-line deaths to the families of the fallen. This task, too, fell to the block warden.

As more party officials and office staff were called up to fight, fewer were left to carry out the growing list of responsibilities. Even so, many party workers remained dutiful. Eyewitness accounts describe block wardens still trudging through the rubble in the war's final days, updating index cards to record which bombed-out buildings



Culture came under control

Hans Hinkel (1901–1960), head of the Propaganda Ministry's Department for Film:

From offices inside the Propaganda Ministry, Hans Hinkel and a team of colleagues ran the Nazis' Film Division. Their job was to distribute propaganda films and exclude Jews from German cinema and cultural life.

BUNDESARCHIV

continued

to shelter surviving families.

When Hitler created the *Volkssturm* militia on 18th October 1944 – a last-ditch home defence force made up mainly of young boys and old men – the local party card indexes came in handy one last time. Using these records, the offices were able to identify and mobilise all males between the ages of 16 and 60 who had not yet been drafted. These men, lacking military training or proper weapons, were now expected to defend the Reich. In the absence of formal army flags, many new recruits swore their oaths of loyalty under the supervision of the block warden – with their hand on the local *Ortsgruppe* banner – before marching off to what would be the final battle for Hitler's crumbling empire.

Even Hitler's pencil-pushers had become desperate soldiers in the dying days of the Third Reich. □

Towards the end of the war, party offices were tasked with organising the so-called* Volkssturm *– a civilian militia meant to defend the Fatherland.

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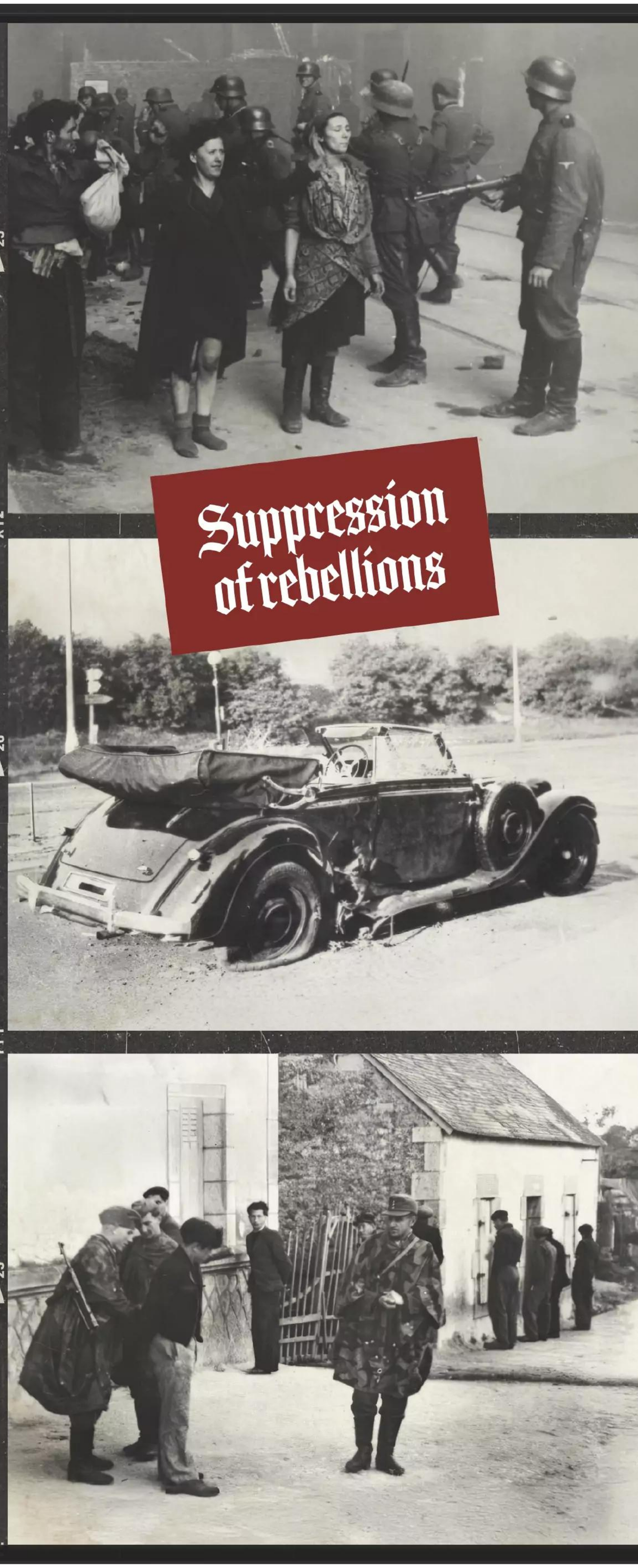
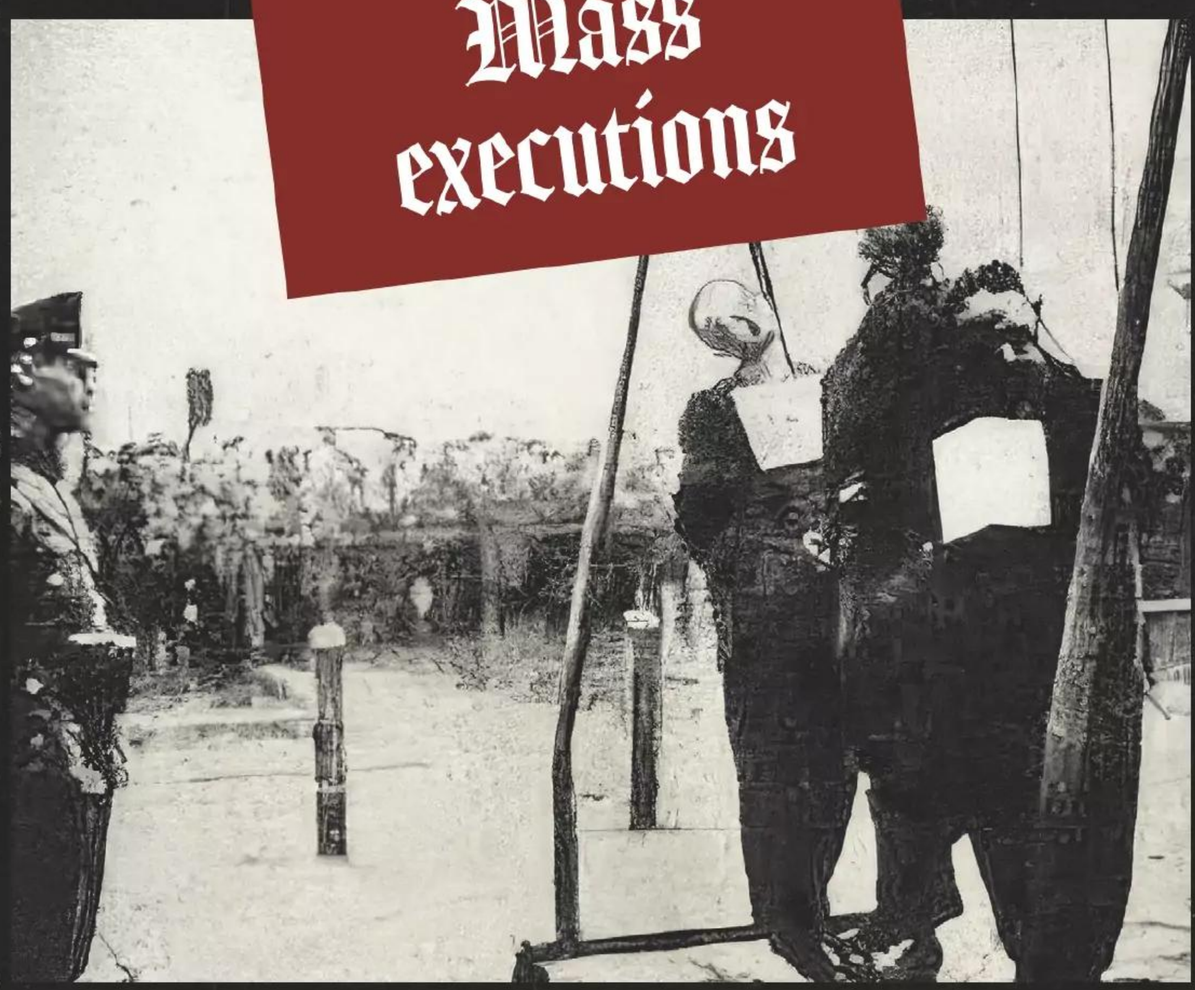
Governor SPREAD TERROR

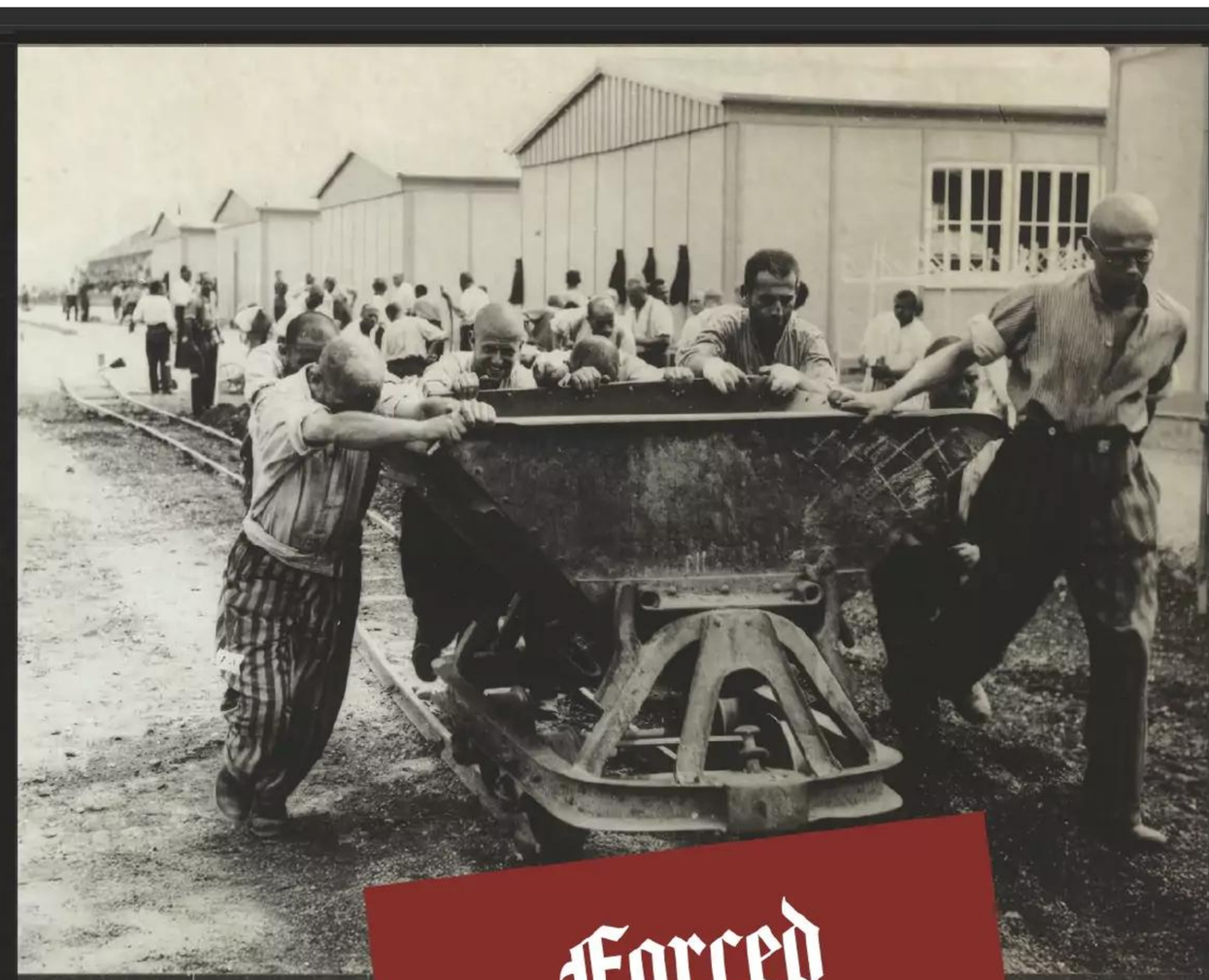
To rule the Nazi empire, Hitler appointed a number of men as his proxies in the occupied territories. All of them were responsible for horrific crimes, yet one was more feared than the rest: the ice-cold Governor-General of Poland, Hans Frank. From his headquarters in Krakow, he crushed any hint of resistance and sent millions of Poles to their deaths.

BUNDESARCHIV, GETTY IMAGES & WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Mass executions





Forced labour

At midnight on 4th July 1941, there was a knock on the door of Franciszek Groër, a paediatrician and professor at Jan Kazimierz University in the then Polish city of Lviv. Outside stood a few men from the SS. They ordered Groër to follow them to their car. Through the dark streets, the group drove to Bursa Abrahamowiczów, an old school that now served as a hospital.

Groër was led into a large hall. In a flash, he recognised several colleagues from Lviv's university world before he was ordered to stand facing the wall. Staring straight ahead, he could hear the stomping of boots and shouts of command, and sensed several civilians like himself being led into the room. As the doctor gathered his courage and turned his head to get a glimpse of what was going on, he was hit by a blow from a German rifle butt.

After that, Groër was left to listen to what was happening around him, and what he heard sent chills and fear through his body. Every ten minutes or so, orders in German, gunshots and eerie screams rang out from the basement. Each shot was commented on by one of the German guards. *"Einer weniger"* ("One less"), they said.

The purge of intellectuals and university professors in Lviv was orchestrated and authorised by Hans Frank, Governor-General of Poland. And the executions were just a few of thousands. Throughout the war, Hitler's local henchmen, such as Hans Frank, oppressed and terrorised the population, not just in Poland, but throughout occupied Europe – resulting in millions of deaths.

Slavs were to be slaves

A little less than two years had passed since German forces had crossed the Polish borders on 1st September 1939. With overwhelming force, Hitler's troops had since subjugated most of the continent. The captured territories were ruled by Germans appointed by Hitler or by puppet governments – local political leaders who were effectively subordinate to the Germans. What they all had in common was that their task was to fulfil Hitler's overall goal: to exploit the occupied territories, their land, raw materials, manpower and other assets for the benefit of Germany and the Greater Germanic Reich.

This was especially true in the east. Hitler considered the Slavic population of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to be racially inferior to the Germans, and as race dictated the fate of a people according to Nazi ideology, the Slavs had to submit to the superior Germans. In other words, the Slavic population of Eastern Europe were to be slaves to the Aryan Germans – or exterminated if

Every ten minutes or so, orders in German, gunshots and eerie screams rang out

necessary. The policy was officially enshrined in the *Generalplan Ost,* in which the Nazis described how they would incorporate the western part of the Soviet Union, the Baltic States, Poland and large areas of Ukraine into a new *Lebensraum,* a huge area required to make the Greater Germanic Reich strong and self-sufficient in all essential raw materials.

Although *Generalplan Ost* was not formulated until 1941, the countries affected sensed Germany's intentions immediately upon occupation – not least Poland, which after the invasion was given the status of General Government, an occupied territory that had not been incorporated into the German Reich. The country had a strong sense of nationhood and a large, politically aware intelligentsia – two things that the Germans feared would give rise to a threatening resistance movement.

To counter the threat and implement German policy, Hitler appointed Hans Frank. A long-time party member and lawyer, Frank had worked as an advisor to Hitler for several years. As Poland's Governor-General, he was given the broadest powers imaginable – only Hitler was above him, and the lawyer proved to have as keen a sense for cruelty as for dry legalese.

From the outset, Hans Frank cracked down on any sign of resistance. When, shortly after his appointment, a group of Poles put up posters commemorating Poland's Independence Day on 11th November 1939, Frank ordered that one man from every home displaying such a poster be arrested and shot.

Executions were carried out in deserted forests

Frank elaborated on his plans for his reign of terror on 6th February 1940 in an interview in the Nazi party newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter.* When asked about the difference between the leadership of the General Government and the Protectorate, which included what is now the Czech Republic, he replied:

"I can tell you a graphic difference. In Prague, for example, big red posters were put up on which could be read that seven Czechs had been shot today. I said to myself: if I put up a poster for every seven Poles shot, the forests of Poland would not be sufficient to manufacture the paper for such posters."

The following month, the hunt for intellectuals began. In the *AB-Aktion (Ausserordentliche Befriedungsaktion* – Extraordinary Pacification Operation), the Germans arrested, deported and murdered thousands of Polish leaders, politicians, officials, university employees and priests between March and July 1940.

The killings were carried out by the SS and police, with the help of the German security services, and were mainly done »

The atrocities began in the first days of the war, when up to 400 Polish civilians were executed in the city of Bydgoszcz.
GETTY IMAGES

The invasion of Poland on 1st September 1939 marked the beginning of brutal Nazi slaughter in the eastern occupied territories.
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6 MILLION

Poles were murdered during World War II by both the Nazis and Stalin's communist regime, historians estimate

» in forests and deserted areas. Historians estimate that more than 7,000 people lost their lives. Among the most extensive single actions was the execution of 358 members of Warsaw's political, cultural and social elite on 20th and 21st February in a forest near the village of Palmiry, north-west of the city. The victims were shot and thrown into a mass grave. To cover up the crime, the Nazis immediately planted young pine trees at the site.

Similar actions continued in the following months, targeting both Jews and intellectuals. Among those arrested were Franciszek Groër and his colleagues in Lviv. While some of those apprehended were executed in the hospital, others were dragged to the nearby Wuleckie Hill, where soldiers hastily dug a mass grave. Tadeusz Gumowski, an engineer who lived nearby, watched the scene through binoculars from his window.

"The pit was dug in about 30 minutes. The prisoners were brought in batches of four ... and made to stand in line facing us along the edge of the pit. The firing squad stood on the opposite side of the grave. A volley rang out and almost all fell into the pit. Prof. Witkiewicz crossed himself and collapsed ... Approximately 20 persons were shot that night. None of them received a coup de grace after the volley. It is quite probable that some were buried alive," Gumowski later said.

The massacre claimed the lives of at least 25 professors, doctors and intellectuals from Lviv. Franciszek Groër was the only one of those arrested to be released. No one knows why, but historians today speculate that it was because he was married to an English woman and the Germans feared that executing the professor would attract international attention.

Hans Frank's methods were so inhumane that Johannes Blaskowitz, colonel general and commander-in-chief in the East, based in Poland, lodged a complaint with Hitler. He predicted that Frank's heavy-handedness would only increase the Poles' resistance. Blaskowitz's warnings were met with scorn by Hitler, who characterised the general's concerns as "Salvation Army attitude". Soon after, Blaskowitz was sacked and replaced with a less critical colleague.

Poles were put to work for the Germans

Hitler's reaction should have surprised no one. The violence was in strict accordance with the Nazis' plans for Poland. For the country to be useful as *Lebensraum* in the future empire, a large part of the Slavic population had to be eliminated.

"Where 12 million Poles now live is to be populated by four to five million Germans. The General Government must become as German as the Rhineland," Frank declared to his subordinates in March 1941. Hans Frank and other Nazis even made detailed plans to transform Warsaw into a model German city. The city was to be razed to the ground in its current form and rebuilt as the *Neue deutsche Stadt Warschau,* the New German City of Warsaw.

Not all Poles were to be killed, however. Some were destined to do the hard and dirty work in farms, mines and factories. This part of the policy came into effect from Frank's first day, when the governor-general introduced forced labour for Poles aged between 18 and 60. Less than two months later, on 14th December 1939, the provision was extended to 14- to 18-year-olds. Forced labour was to be performed ten hours a day, six days a week. Those who refused or didn't work hard enough were sent to Germany as forced labourers.

However, doing your job was no guarantee against deportation, because Frank's people used any excuse to round up Poles for the Nazi war industry.

"You walk on a street from your house to your aunt's house, and suddenly the street is closed by the gendarmes on both sides. And all the people are surrounded and asked to show their papers. 'Are you working somewhere? Who are you? What's your occupation? What are you doing now?' And whoever appeared not employed in a meaningful way that involves supporting »

Hans Frank was feared by all

Lawyer Hans Frank was hired by the Nazi Party to help its members when they fell foul of the law. But it was as Poland's unusually brutal governor-general that Frank earned his fame – and eternal shame.

As a young law student, Hans Frank joined the DAP, *Deutsche Arbeiterpartei,* the forerunner of the Nazi Party. Later, at the age of 23, he took part in Hitler's failed beer hall coup in 1923. Three years on, when the Nazi Party was looking for a lawyer who would defend its members for free, Frank immediately volunteered for the job.

This volunteer work paved the way for Frank's political career. Soon he was serving as both Hitler's legal advisor and as head of the Nazi Lawyers' Association.

However, Frank didn't really make a name for himself until he was appointed Governor-General of Poland in 1939. The Nazi leader ruled the country with unprecedented brutality. He was responsible for the liquidation of the Polish elite and dissidents, the deportation of thousands of forced labourers, and the creation of Jewish ghettos, which to all intents and purposes served as a transit to the extermination camps of the General Government.

Frank also organised and directed the theft of thousands of objects of art and works of historical and cultural value to Poland. At the Nuremberg trials after the war, Frank was convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity. "I ask God to accept me with mercy" were the criminal's last words before he was executed by hanging on 16th October 1946.

In 1943, the Nazis cleared the Warsaw ghetto. Around 50,000 Jews remained, who were immediately sent to be exterminated in Treblinka and Majdanek.
STROOP REPORT & BUNDESARCHIV

I ask God to accept me with mercy

Hans Frank's last words before his execution for war crimes

» the German war effort was being singled out, put in a truck, and shipped to the railroad station and put on a train and shipped to Germany," recalled Wallace Witkowski, who was born in the city of Kielce in 1928, 11 years before the German invasion.

The deportations increased as more and more German men were sent to the front, and Germany's labour shortage became critical. Historians believe that the General Government supplied at least 1.5 million Poles as forced labour to Nazi Germany.

Jews were starved to death

The majority of Poland's food was sent to Germany in accordance with the plan for the eastern territories. Meanwhile, Poles lived on rations that took them close to starvation, and infectious diseases such as typhus were rampant. However, Jews suffered most. Poland was home to 3.3 million Jews in 1939, and they were singled out by Hans Frank as particular enemies. In Warsaw, the city's 380,000 Jews were already packed into a ghetto by October 1940. As the Germans deported Jews from other parts of Poland to the ghetto, the number grew to at least 400,000.

The ghetto was so crowded that six or seven people had to share a room, and the population lived far below the hunger line as the daily food ration was limited to a tenth of the authorities' recommended calorie intake. The cramped conditions and poor diet led to up to 80,000 of the ghetto's inhabitants dying of starvation and disease. Leaving the ghetto was strictly forbidden and from 15th October 1941, following a decree by Frank, was punishable by death. Nothing about the suffering of the Jews moved Frank, who lived in luxury at Wawel Castle in Krakow, surrounded by art stolen from Polish museums and collections.

"We who for 20 years past have been fighting beside the Führer cannot be asked to have any consideration left for the Jews. If the Jews in the world ask for pity today, this leaves us cold," Frank declared to a Nazi Party meeting in the Polish city of Lublin on 22nd January 1941. The following year, in July 1942, the transport of Jews to the Treblinka extermination camp began. Less than a year later, in spring 1943, all the ghetto Jews were either executed on the spot or sent to extermination camps in remote locations in Poland – far from the inquisitive eyes of the German population.

The violence was far from limited to Poland. And the brutality was particularly pronounced if the population opposed Hitler's leading man in the region. The people of Bohemia and Moravia, part of what is now the Czech Republic, became targets of this violence. The area was one of the early Nazi conquests and given the status of a protectorate – an autonomous part of the German Reich. Formally, the Czech president ruled, but in reality, all power rested with the German Reich Protector, who could reverse any of the president's decisions with the stroke of a pen.

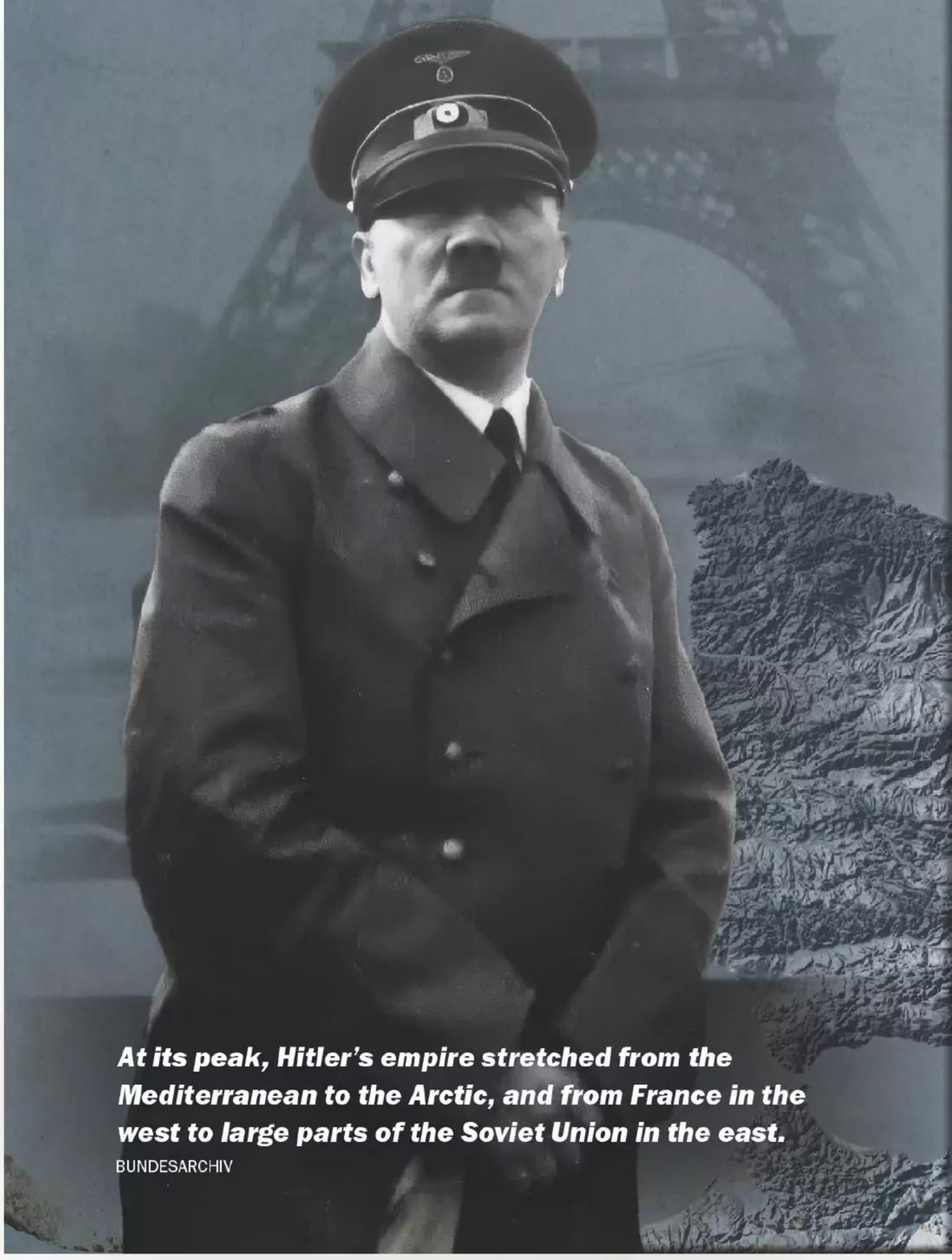
Entire town had to pay for murder of Reich Protector

As in Poland, the occupation was followed by brutal repression. The Germans cracked down on communists, social democrats and Jews, and in the autumn of 1941, they tightened their grip. This happened when Reinhard Heydrich took over as deputy.

Heydrich was not just anyone. As an SS officer, head of the feared German security service and one of the main men behind *die Endlösung,* the industrialised extermination of Europe's Jews, he was known for his ruthlessness. And Heydrich moved quickly in his new role. By the end of November 1941, he'd had »

Hitler's empire was split into five

By 1941, the Nazis controlled half of Europe's population and Hitler soon realised that the vast empire could not be run on the same principles everywhere. German-controlled Europe was therefore divided into five parts, each with its own form of government. What they all had in common was that the Germans – and ultimately Hitler – always had the last word.



At its peak, Hitler's empire stretched from the Mediterranean to the Arctic, and from France in the west to large parts of the Soviet Union in the east.
BUNDESARCHIV

MALENE VINTHER & SHUTTERSTOCK

GERMANY

1 Germany was subject to the Führer, Adolf Hitler, who was the country's undisputed leader. The dictator's will was carried out through ministers and other government bodies, including the military, as well as the Nazi Party.

GENERAL GOVERNMENT

2 The General Government was ruled by the governor-general and his subordinates, the heads of the four districts in the area. The administration consisted entirely of German officials.

PROTECTORATE

3 The Protectorate had the status of a self-governing entity under the Czech president, Emil Hácha. However, he was a puppet of the Germans and his decisions could be overruled at any time by the Reich protector, the de facto ruler. Administratively, the Protectorate was divided into two countries – Bohemia and Moravia.

OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

4 Countries such as France, the Netherlands and Belgium were first governed by a military administration and later by a civilian Reich Commissioner. The same applied to Ostland – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Norway was governed from the start by a Reich Commissioner, while Denmark was also under civilian leadership headed by a Reich Plenipotentiary.

VICHY FRANCE

5 After the invasion in 1940, France made an agreement with the Germans that divided the country in two. The northern part and a belt along the Atlantic coast were occupied by the Nazis. The south-eastern part of France remained formally under French control. In reality, the government, which ruled from the city of Vichy, was a puppet government controlled by Germany.

» 6,000 Czechs arrested and hundreds executed. Almost 1,300 were sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp that winter. These actions earned Heydrich the nickname the Butcher of Prague and fuelled popular resistance.

On 27th May 1942, two Czech resistance fighters carried out a bomb attack on Heydrich's car just outside Prague. Heydrich survived the attack but died of his wounds on 4th June 1942. The attack had terrible consequences. In revenge for the killing, Hitler had Lidice, a small town about 20 kilometres west of Prague, razed to the ground. The town's men and boys over the age of 15 were taken to a farm outside the town, where they were shot.

The Germans also murdered seven women and sent the rest to Ravensbrück, a female-only concentration camp north of Berlin. The city's 105 children also suffered a cruel fate. A small minority, judged to look sufficiently Aryan, were adopted out to German families, but the remaining 82 were taken to the extermination camp in Chełmno. Their fate is unknown, but historians believe they were killed in mobile gas chambers on arrival.

When Lidice was emptied of people, the Germans set fire to the town. Later, they blew up the ruins.

"All men of Lidice, Czechoslovakia, have been shot. The women deported to a concentration camp. The children sent to appropriate centres. The name of the village was immediately abolished," was the chilling message to Berlin. The death of the Reich Protector was avenged.

Germans celebrated with French champagne

The Lidice massacre was so violent and unprecedented that Winston Churchill considered having British planes bomb German villages in retaliation – a plan that was abandoned. In Western Europe, closer to Churchill's free Britain, the occupation was generally less brutal. The fact that the Germans spared Western Europeans was partly due to the fact that the Nazis considered the population to be closely related to Germanic peoples. The sense of Aryan community meant that Hitler believed Western Europeans would be open to close cooperation – under German sovereignty, naturally. This applied to France, for example, an area that for the Germans offered a wealth of attractive raw materials, from iron ore to champagne. After the invasion, France was divided into two zones. While the Germans occupied northern and central France, and the Channel and Atlantic coasts, the south-eastern part stayed under French rule. The area was ruled from the spa town of Vichy by former general and World War I national hero Philippe Pétain.

With his right-wing nationalist and authoritarian views, Pétain was a perfect partner for the Germans and played a role similar to that of German deputies in other occupied countries. Under Pétain's Vichy government, the Germans were free to forcibly conscript labour, deport Jews and fight the Resistance. However, persecution and an everyday life of deprivation, rationing and an official calorie limit of just 1,300 calories a day fuelled opposition. France harboured a strong resistance movement throughout the war, and the country also saw spontaneous protests and uprisings – not least in working-class neighbourhoods, where the lack of food and other necessities hit hardest.

Immigrant neighbourhood was razed to the ground

Among the places where discontent boiled over was Marseille's old port district. The area was the oldest in the city and home to Jews, immigrants, communists and labour activists. Many of the new immigrants were Italians who had fled Mussolini's Italy and held strong anti-fascist views. Both Pétain and the Nazi occupiers wanted to clear the neighbourhood, which, with its densely packed houses and winding streets, provided a perfect hiding place for Resistance fighters and fugitives. When unrest broke out in Marseille in January 1943, the Germans – and Pétain – saw a golden opportunity. On 22nd January, Gestapo and French police officers began knocking on doors. Meanwhile, blaring loudspeakers urged residents to leave their homes, take their most important belongings and lock the doors behind them. A total of 25,000 people were displaced over the following days.

Twelve thousand French police officers drafted in from all over France took part in the evictions, so many people didn't realise »

In France, the Nazis used harsh measures against the Resistance. Members were executed or sent to concentration camps.
BUNDESARCHIV

Millions of innocent people had to be murdered to make way for a new Greater Germanic Reich.

US HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Sinister plan to remove Jews and Slavs

As soon as he took power in 1933, Hitler began dreaming of a new Greater Germanic Reich. And the plan was clear: in the East, Slavic 'subhumans' were to be expelled and the resource-rich territories taken over by Germany. Everything was formulated in *Generalplan Ost*, which ended up costing millions of lives.

After Germany's early battlefield victories, Heinrich Himmler and other leading Nazis drew up a plan in 1941 for the territories it had occupied in the East. The land, which included Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus and parts of the Soviet Union and Ukraine, was to be turned into a *Lebensraum,* an area that would provide enough farmland and resources to make Germany self-sufficient.

The area would also provide space for the growing German population. In order to accommodate the approximately ten million Germans who were supposed to move to and inhabit the new *Lebensraum*, large parts of the 45-million Jewish and Slavic population had to be made forced labourers, displaced or killed. The Nazis justified the genocide on the grounds that the Slavs were racially inferior, so could be subjugated or exterminated for the common good.

The plan was abandoned after the defeat at Stalingrad in February 1943 convinced the Germans that final victory in the East was a long way off. By then, the Germans had been trying to realise *Generalplan Ost* for four years and, according to historians, had murdered 14.4 million Slavs, including 3.4 million Slavic Jews.

BUNDESARCHIV

The Nazi top brass commissioned architects to design future German cities in the newly captured areas.

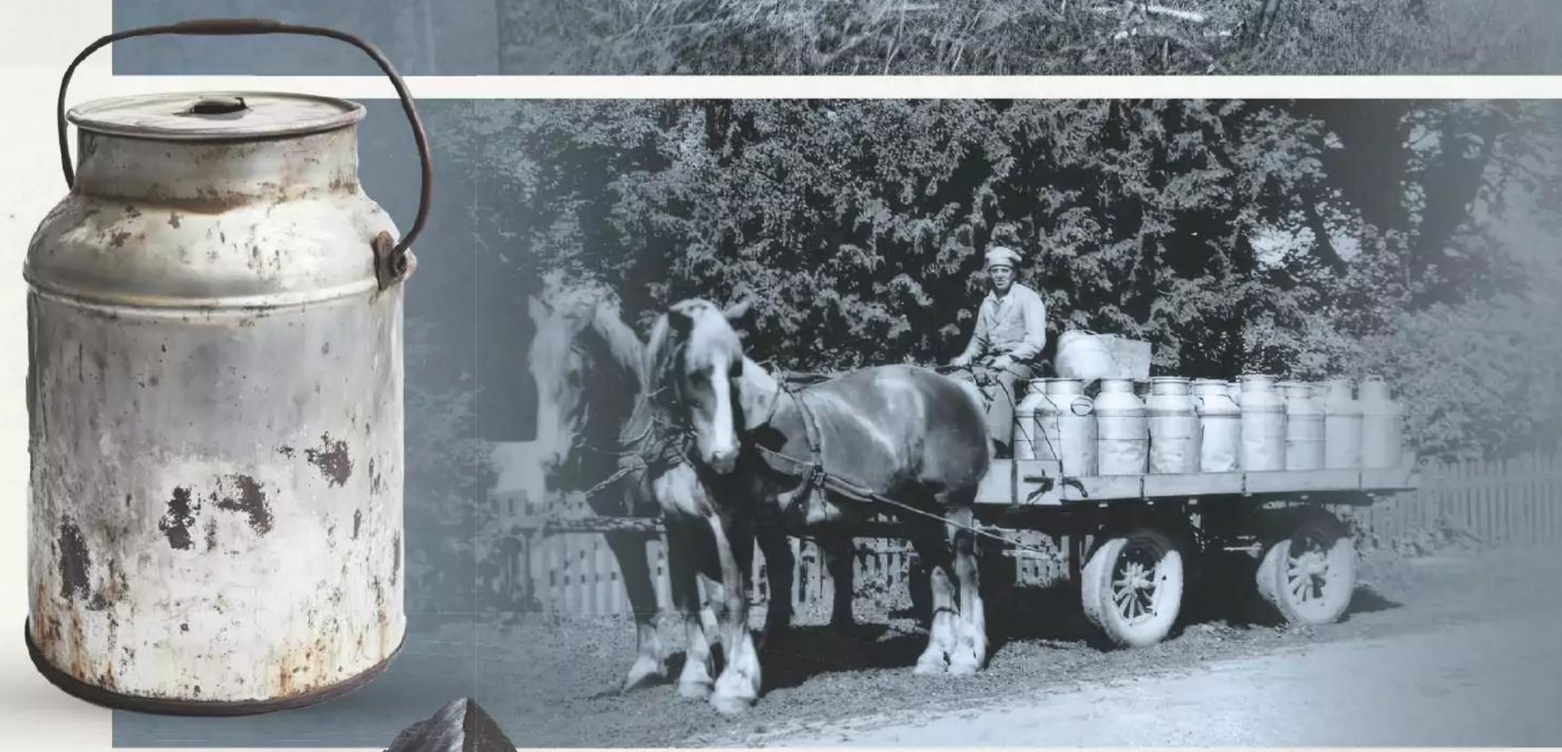
Nazis plundered resources

For the Nazis, the occupied territories became a smorgasbord of important natural resources. They therefore had no scruples about helping themselves to the spoils in German-controlled areas, which supplied almost everything from tanks and iron ore to dairy products and pork.

WEAPONS

Although German industry was working around the clock towards the end of the war, it couldn't keep up with the army's demand for tanks, aircraft and guns. So, the arms industry in the annexed Sudetenland, the German-speaking part of the Czech Republic, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia became vital. Particularly useful were the Skoda works, which produced tanks, weapons, ammunition, aircraft and trains.

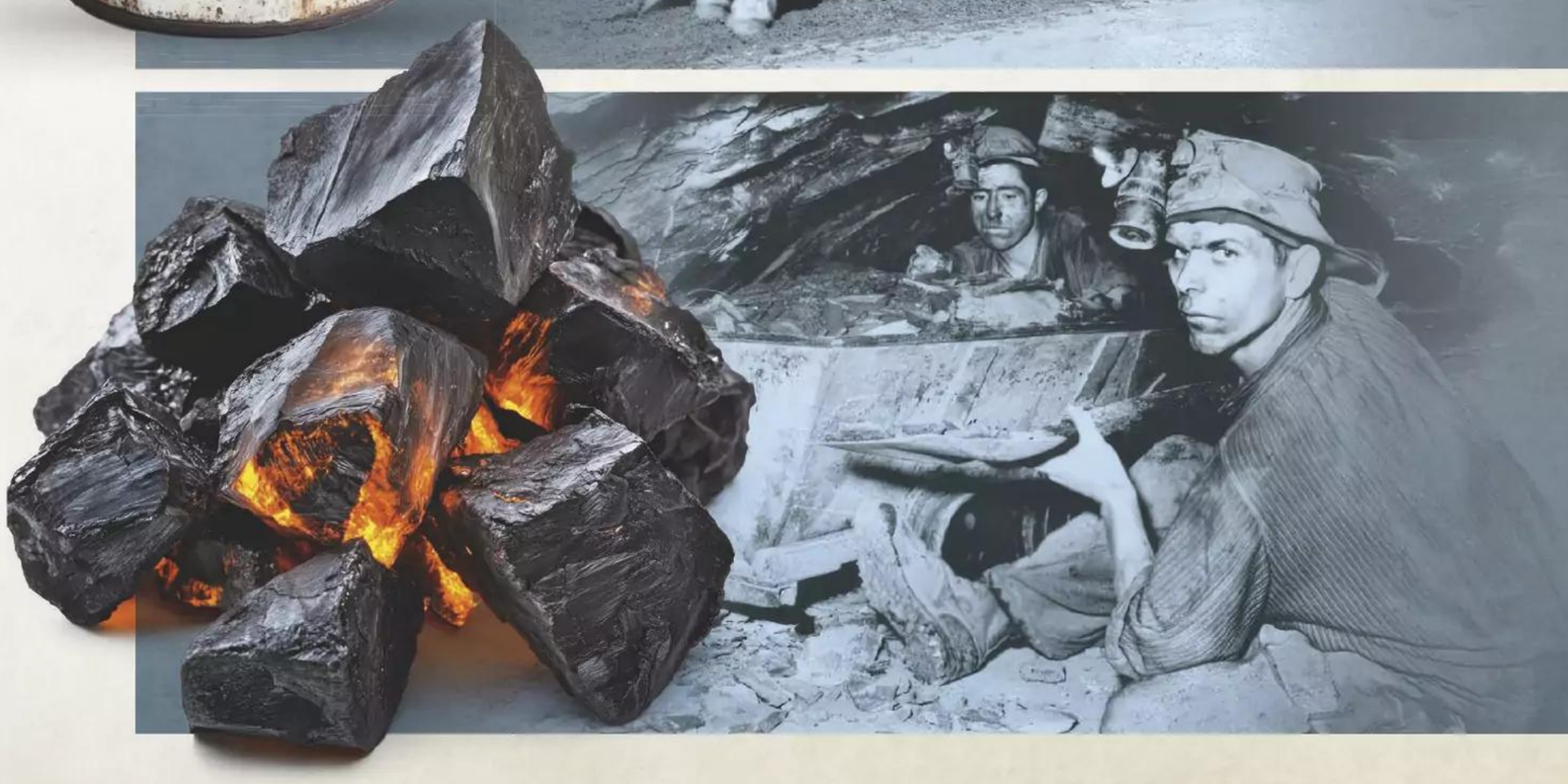
SHUTTERSTOCK & WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



AGRICULTURAL GOODS

Tonnes of wheat, barley and rye were sourced mainly from Eastern Europe, where Poland and Ukraine had huge agricultural areas with particularly fertile soil. In addition, grain and wine were imported from south-eastern Europe and France. Denmark and the Netherlands were popularly known as Germany's pantry, and farmers from these areas supplied pork and a wide range of dairy products, such as cheese and butter.

MALENE VINTHER & MIDJOURNEY & VOGNSERUP GODS



COAL, OIL AND IRON

Poland became a major supplier of coal to German industry, while the Germans received iron ore from Austria, which was annexed by Germany during the Anschluss in 1938, and from France. The Nazis also benefited from the French Michelin factories' large stocks of natural rubber, which the Germans took over during the invasion. Germany also obtained large quantities of oil from Romania, which was formally allied with Germany.

MALENE VINTHER & MIDJOURNEY & BUNDESARCHIV

» what was happening. "When we left the apartments, we were led down the street by the French police. Like a flock of sheep, we were led to the harbour. And nobody reacted. If it had been the Germans knocking on the door, we would definitely have resisted," recalled Antoine Mignemi, the son of Italian immigrants, who was around six years old when his family was displaced. At the harbour, buses and trams were waiting to take the residents away.

Around 15,000 were sent to a nearby train station and divided into groups. With information from Pétain's records, the Germans identified Jews, political opponents and others who were likely to resist Hitler. They were sent to concentration camps. Among them were 2,000 Jews who ended up in the death camps in the East. About a week later, the remaining French people returned to Marseille. By then, their entire neighbourhood had been blown to pieces – 1,400 buildings and 50 streets were gone for ever.

Even nationalities that the Germans viewed with the mildest of eyes were subjected to atrocities – including the Dutch, who were regarded by the Germans as almost fully-fledged members of the Aryan *Herrenvolk* (master race). On 17th September 1944, Dutch railway workers went on strike. The aim was to prevent German weapons from reaching their destination and thus help the Allies, who were about to launch a major offensive. The Nazis responded by halting all food transport to the west of the country. Historians estimate that around 22,000 Dutch people died of starvation, cold and disease before Allied supplies arrived in April 1945.

By then, peace and the end of Nazi Germany was in sight. In Poland, Hans Frank's capital lay in ruins. During August the previous year, resistance fighters in Warsaw had risen up to fight the German occupiers. The Nazis, led by Hans Frank, decided to crush the rebels in an action that would surpass all previous horrors. Men, women and children were shot on the spot. Women were raped and children had their heads crushed with rifle butts as part of the subjugation of the rebellious population.

On 5th August 1944, a day that would go down in Polish history as Black Saturday, SS soldiers burned down large parts of the city. Beforehand, they threw hand grenades into cellars and blocked gates and doors. Those who tried to escape were shot. Men, women and children were trapped in the houses, doomed to be burned alive.

"People were burning alive and engulfed in flames and ran to the windows. Nobody upstairs could escape from the fire; they were all burned alive," said one eyewitness.

"For the most part, Warsaw is in flames. Burning down the houses is the most reliable means of liquidating the insurgents' hideouts," Hans Frank wrote to Hitler the same day, promising that the rebellion would be punished "with complete destruction after the suppression or collapse of the uprising".

Frank kept his word. During and after the uprising, Warsaw was virtually levelled and up to 150,000 civilians were killed by the Nazis. With the war now going so decisively in the Allies' favour, Frank and the other Nazis' dreams of a submissive Europe under the Greater Germanic Reich lay in ruins. Only a few months would pass before Germany finally surrendered.

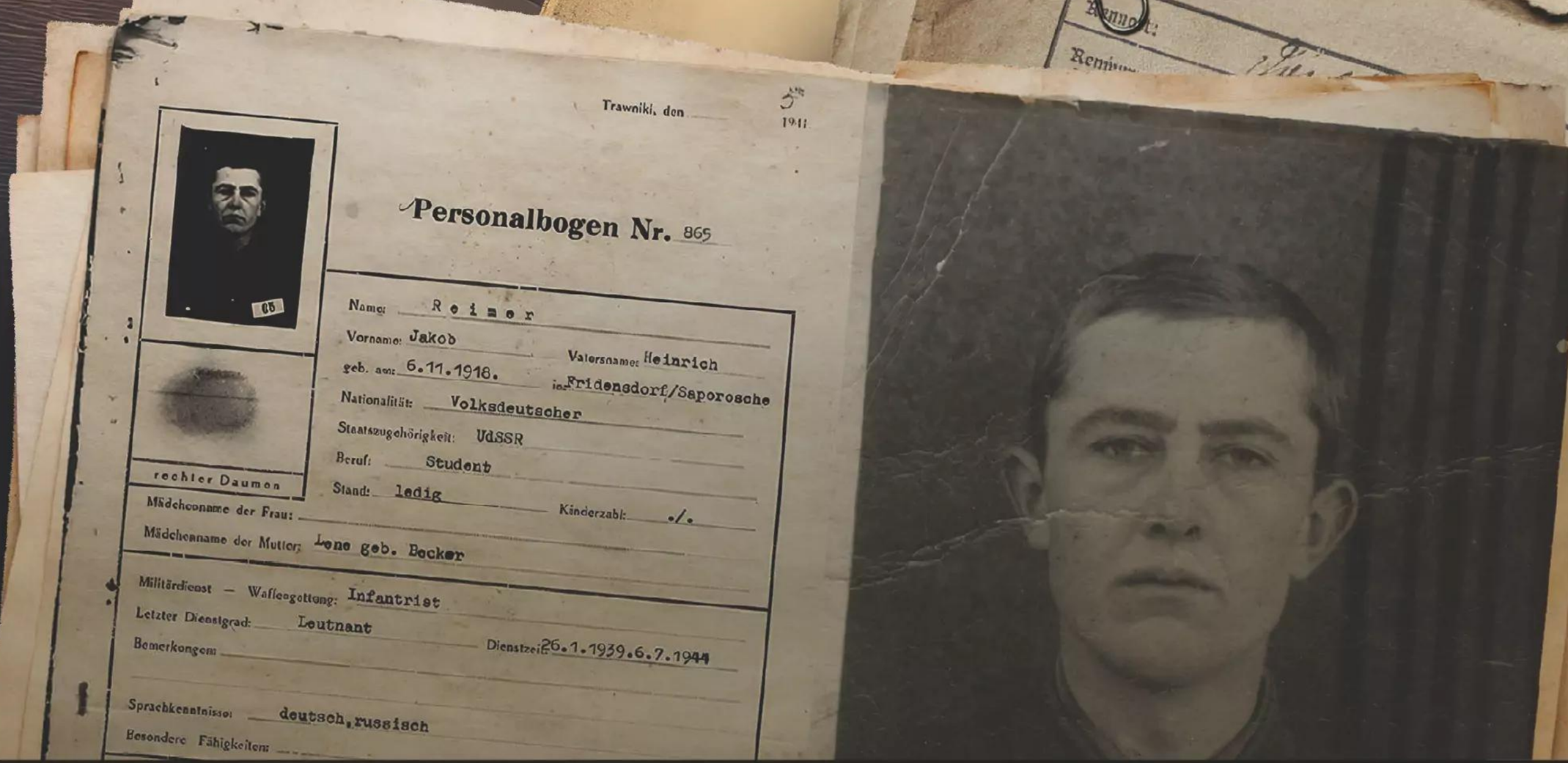
After the end of the war, Hans Frank and other top leaders of the occupied countries were arrested and hanged for their crimes. Hitler's deputies had been exterminated after six years of horror. □

Vichy France's leader, Philippe Pétain, was sentenced to death but avoided execution due to his advanced age. He died in 1951 at the age of 95.
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

With information from Pétain's records, the Germans identified Jews, political opponents and others who were likely to resist Hitler

GESTAPO watched everything

Only 32,000 men and women worked in Hitler's secret police, but through bribery, fear and a web of informers they built a network that had eyes and ears in every school and every workplace. In Nazi Germany, no one could feel safe.



PO

In the Gestapo's headquarters in the centre of Berlin, there were thousands upon thousands of index cards containing information about opponents of Nazism.

MALENE VINTHER & MIDJOURNEY

The Gestapo was divided into five

A DEPARTMENT A:
Hunted political opponents

B DEPARTMENT B:
Tracked down Jews

C DEPARTMENT C:
Sent political foes to camps

D DEPARTMENT D:
Firmly controlled occupied lands

E DEPARTMENT E:
Dealt with counter-espionage

Ernst Thälmann knew that the Nazis were on his tail. The 46-year-old leader of Germany's Communist Party had therefore already prepared himself for flight or arrest when what would become Hitler's secret police knocked on the door of the flat at Lützower Strasse 9 in Berlin on 3rd March 1933. Although the arrest had been expected, nothing had prepared Thälmann for the horrors that were soon to befall him in the interrogation room.

For four and a half hours, a number of men beat, kicked and tortured Thälmann to pressure him into informing on his political activities and his comrades. One of the blows hit Thälmann on the jaw and the Communist leader had four teeth broken.

But the climax came when "they ordered me to take off my pants and then two men grabbed me by the back of the neck and placed me across a footstool", Thälmann later recounted in a letter he managed to have smuggled out of prison.

"A uniformed Gestapo officer struck repeated measured blows on my buttocks with a whip made of braided hippopotamus hide. Mad with pain, I screamed again and again as loudly as I could," the Communist leader wrote in the letter.

Thälmann was one of the first in a long line of victims of the new secret police. Soon after, the organisation was officially named *Geheime Staatspolizei* – the secret state police. But it was under the abbreviation Gestapo that it became feared and infamous. Over the next 12 years, torture, threats and murder were the secret agents' craft, and the Gestapo used any means to track, monitor and persecute those who opposed the Nazi state.

Communists were the regime's first enemies

When Ernst Thälmann was arrested, the Nazis had been in power for just over a month, yet they had already managed to suspend the rule of law. The decisive step was taken on 28th February 1933. The night before, an arson attack had ravaged the Reichstag building – a catastrophe the Nazis used to push through the so-called Reichstag Fire Decree, which suspended the rights of the existing constitution.

The new decree meant open season on socialists and communists like Ernst Thälmann and paved the way for the Gestapo, which was formally founded on 26th April 1933. At the head of Hitler's new secret police stood Hermann Göring, one of the Führer's most trusted men. As Interior Minister of Prussia, Göring had already purged the police of employees who were not fanatical Nazis, and he now used his newly created secret department to persecute the regime's enemies. Communists, Social Democrats and trade unionists were in the first weeks »

Gestapo's departments

Department A

A Had the task of monitoring political opponents. The unit was divided into four subdivisions, each keeping watch over specific political groups. Surveillance of the Communists, the Nazis' main enemy, was carried out separately by one of the subdivisions.

On 28th February 1933 Hitler seized unlimited power. Immediately afterwards the arrests of political enemies began.
BUNDESARCHIV

Prussian police became Hitler's watchdogs

Hermann Göring took control of the Prussian police as newly appointed interior minister and created the Gestapo – the Nazis' secret state police. Soon no one could feel safe.

When Hitler became chancellor in January 1933, he placed Nazis in all key positions in Germany. Hermann Göring, one of Hitler's most trusted men, was appointed interior minister of Prussia and thereby gained control over the country's largest police force, a position he exploited to the fullest.

Göring immediately set about reshaping the police. He separated the departments handling political cases and intelligence and merged them into a new, fearsome unit: Geheime Staatspolizei – Gestapo. The name, it is said, came about almost by chance when a postal official came up with the abbreviation so the name could fit on a stamp. But there was nothing accidental about the Gestapo's purpose. In the spring of 1933, while the ministry still housed non-Nazi officials, Göring moved the Gestapo out of the interior ministry's premises. At the beginning of May they settled in a former art school in central Berlin at Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8. The address would soon become synonymous with terror and repression throughout Germany.

From 1933, the Germans could see ordinary police patrolling side by side with Nazi auxiliary police.
BUNDESARCHIV

» and months of 1933 placed in custody – either in detention centres, military prisons or regular holding institutions. That included Thälmann, who after being tortured ended up in a cell in Moabit Prison in Berlin. The less fortunate were sent to concentration camps. The first, Dachau, housed in a disused munitions factory outside Munich, opened as early as 22nd March 1933. The camps were not yet carrying out systematic murders, but the abuse was bad enough that the first reports of deaths came from Dachau as early as April. And Hermann Göring was evidently pleased with his work.

"I alone created, on my own initiative, the 'State Security Service'. This is the instrument which is so much feared and which is chiefly responsible for the fact that in Germany and Prussia today there is no question of a Marxist or Communist danger..." he boasted.

Göring and his fellow party members had good reason to be satisfied. Not only had the Gestapo, within short order, imprisoned thousands of political opponents – for example, in Dachau, where historians estimate that 4,800 were interned in the first year alone – the regime had also outlawed all open and legal opposition. Trade unions were banned a few months after Hitler took power in January 1933 and shortly afterwards the regime also banned political parties.

But underground resistance continued to thrive. It fell to Göring's successor Heinrich Himmler, police chief in Munich and a fanatical Nazi, to deal with that problem. Himmler took over as head of the Gestapo on 20th April 1934, and the new leader immediately began to build a tight network of informants that the Gestapo could use for even more surveillance.

Stalin's secret police was to be copied

Among the Gestapo's methods was the infiltration of regime-critical groups – for example, in 1935, plainclothes Gestapo officers turned up at a meeting for Catholic youths in Marienheide outside Cologne. The policemen mingled with the crowd while discreetly taking notes.

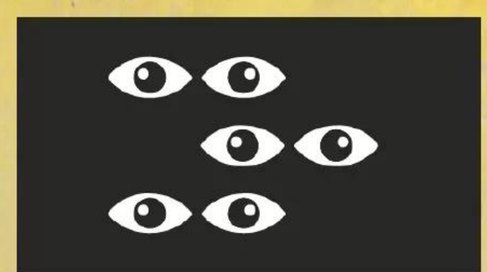
In a speech, the priest, Father K said that "the Catholic youth followed the path of Christ but not the path of a Rosenberg," read one of the recorded remarks, in a reference to Nazi chief ideologist Alfred Rosenberg. Both the priest and the young Catholics were questioned but escaped with a warning. That was not the case for the group of factory workers in Stettin, who Gestapo agents

People watched each other

No one could feel safe in Nazi Germany, for everyone from children to secret agents had infiltrated every part of society and learned that informing and reporting on opponents of the regime was of utmost importance.

CHILDREN BECAME INFORMERS

Children were encouraged to keep an eye on and pass on information about teachers, parents and schoolmates. Knowledge about teachers who didn't live up to the Nazi regime's demands for teaching was especially valued.



WORK WAS MONITORED

Informers at workplaces kept an eye on colleagues and bosses. They especially noted criticism of Hitler and the party and the Nazi-controlled trade unions. Many workers were also more than happy to report unpopular bosses to the Gestapo.

AGENTS HID IN THE CROWD

Gestapo agents dressed in civilian clothes infiltrated groups suspected of disloyalty. The operation could take place over a long period or just at a single meeting or gathering. They kept a special eye on churches and the left wing.

BLOCK WARDENS MONITORED THE CITIES

The Nazi party's uniformed block wardens monitored city residents. If they discovered a suspicious matter, such as if a family received visits from Jews, they were to immediately inform the Gestapo.

SHUTTERSTOCK

infiltrated the following year. Here, surveillance led to the arrest of a total of 280 factory workers accused of producing and distributing illegal, Hitler-critical papers. The arrested spent 11 months in prison before their case was decided. The sentence, when it finally came, was equally severe. The mildest – given for reading the banned papers – was two years. The harshest, six years, was handed to those who had written and produced the papers.

Even with Himmler's organisational skills and the Gestapo's network of agents and informants, the Nazis found it difficult to control all parts of German society, as Himmler had to admit. But help was near. It came from Heinrich Müller, who in 1936 was appointed Gestapo's chief of operations, and who was popularly known as Gestapo-Müller. The nickname was due to the desire to avoid confusion with a general of the same name and was highly appropriate. Although Müller only became head of the Gestapo in 1939, no one would come to shape the secret police and its working methods as much as he did.

Müller also had the best qualifications for the position. In the years after World War I, he had worked for the police in Munich, where he was responsible for monitoring communist and socialist organisations. In that connection, he had studied the methods of the Soviet secret police in detail. Stalin's regime had proven extremely effective in combating organised resistance, and its efficiency was built on a very simple principle.

The core of any effective repression was to isolate the individual citizen so that he was always uncertain whether someone was listening in. Isolation was to be achieved through surveillance and informing. To be truly effective, Müller believed the Gestapo »

Gestapo's departments

Department B

B Monitored churches and religious groups as well as the Freemasons, who the Nazis regarded as enemies of the state. The important surveillance and registration of Jews also fell under Department B – a task that soon became the Gestapo's most important.

The Gestapo's victims numbered in the millions even before adding in the millions of Jews killed in the Holocaust.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Four chiefs led Gestapo

Four very different men led the brutal organisation during Gestapo's 12-year history. Rudolf Diels stood out in particular. In 1940, he refused to issue arrest warrants for Jews and was close to being imprisoned.

The mastermind

HERMANN GÖRING (1933-1934)

Göring joined the party in 1922 and quickly became one of Hitler's most effective henchmen. According to Göring, the creation of the Gestapo in 1933 was his idea and as Prussian minister of the interior, he personally carried out the purge of non-Nazis from the police. After just one year, Göring handed over the leadership of the Gestapo to Heinrich Himmler.

The soft one

RUDOLF DIELS (1933-1934)

Skill and a good working relationship with the top boss, Hermann Göring, earned Diels the position as first head of the Gestapo. He eagerly made use of internment or deportation of political enemies to concentration camps. However, the regime grew tired of Diels, whom the top ranks considered too soft, and he was therefore removed after a year in the role.

The ruthless one

HEINRICH HIMMLER (1934-1945)

Himmler was one of Hitler's early supporters and took part in the Beer Hall Putsch in 1923. Aged 29, he became leader of the SS then succeeded Göring as head of the Gestapo and was efficient yet ruthless. Under him, the Gestapo persecuted all enemies of Nazism, and Himmler was key in the mass extermination of Europe's Jews.

The efficient one

HEINRICH MÜLLER (1939-1945)

As an officer in the Bavarian police, Müller specialised in monitoring communist groups and, in that context, studied Soviet policing methods closely. After Hitler's rise to power, Hitler recruited Müller to his secret police. As Gestapo chief of operations, Müller carried out his duties zealously, especially when it came to the persecution of Jews.

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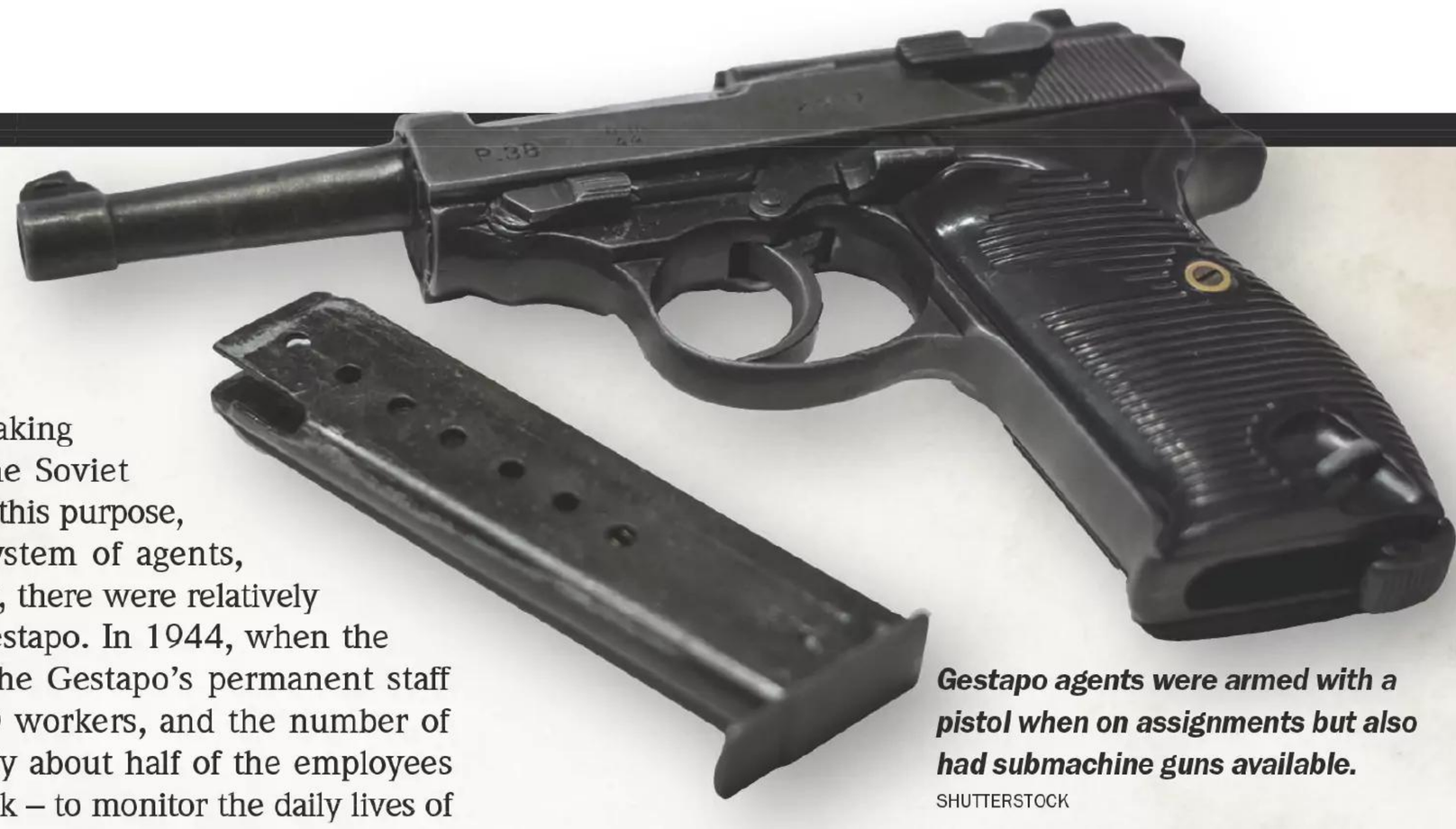
Rudolf Diels married Göring's sister. Diels was probably saved from prison when he refused to carry out an order.



Gestapo agents were armed with a pistol when on assignments but also had submachine guns available.
SHUTTERSTOCK

» had to ensure that the ordinary citizen never felt safe and beyond the party's reach anywhere. Immediately upon taking office he began introducing the Soviet principles into the Gestapo. For this purpose, Müller built an even larger system of agents, informants and reporters. In fact, there were relatively few actual employees in the Gestapo. In 1944, when the organisation was at its peak, the Gestapo's permanent staff comprised only around 32,000 workers, and the number of agents was much smaller – only about half of the employees worked in the field. The core task – to monitor the daily lives of Germans and pass on information about suspicious matters – was therefore carried out by a large network of volunteers or loosely affiliated reporters and informants.

The informants kept watch, for a small fee, at schools, workplaces, cafés and bars, and anywhere else Germans gathered. In residential areas, the Gestapo received reports from the block warden, a party employee whose job was to know everything about the district's families – from what books and newspapers they read, to where they shopped and who visited them. The Gestapo also encouraged citizens to report suspicious behaviour.

Ordinary people took jobs as informers

Many responded to the call, and the most active informers came from the working class or lower middle class. Their eagerness to spy on fellow citizens was likely linked to their motives; while some undoubtedly acted out of idealism and patriotism, many saw informing as a chance for personal gain – especially at workplaces where men from the working class and middle class were in the majority.

For some, the chance to get revenge, eliminate a rival or ingratiate themselves with the authorities in the hope of climbing the social ladder was too great to resist. This was the case with a restaurateur in Bergheim, who, in 1938, accused local milkman, a 47-year-old World War I veteran referred to in sources as Heinrich H, of claiming that the Nazi party "is out to get the poor Jews, but the government works with Jewish money".

In reality, the restaurateur was in financial trouble and wanted to get rid of the milkman to avoid paying his bill. Although witnesses confirmed Heinrich's conflict with the restaurateur, the milkman spent seven months in Gestapo prison.

Far from everyone got off that lightly. Thousands spent years in prison or died during internment or interrogation. Added to this was the torture that was a regular part of Gestapo's interrogation methods. The process followed a set pattern, and the violence began as soon as the arrested person was brought into the interrogation room.

"On arrival, a man in civilian clothes, so small he couldn't reach me to beat me above the head, booted me in the testicles, his face contorted with rage. That was his way of saying hello, I suppose," recalled Wolfgang Szepansky, arrested for left-wing activities, about his interrogation at Gestapo's headquarters in Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8 in central Berlin.

The kick was only the beginning. If the detainee refused to confess or inform on comrades, the torture continued with increasingly malicious and cunning methods. "They used thumbscrews, leg screws, nail under the fingernails, things I couldn't imagine if I hadn't seen them with my own eyes," Szepansky said. Other torture methods were also used. Prisoners had their wrists tied behind their backs and were then hung from the ceiling. In other cases, the executioner forced the victim's head under water until they nearly drowned.

The unconscious victim was then revived, and the interrogation continued. If the victim still refused to give information, the torture started again. Finally, the victim was thrown into a cold cell to spend the night there, still wearing wet clothes.

Hundreds died during the brutal interrogations or succumbed to illness in the filthy cells, if they were not outright murdered by their torturers.

"We possess also the names and details of some eighteen cases in which Jehovah's Witnesses were killed unlawfully. For example, at the beginning of October 1936, a Jehovah's Witness named Peter Heinen of Neuhüller Street, Gelsenkirchen, Westphalia, was beaten to death by officials of the Gestapo in the city hall of Gelsenkirchen," reports a letter written by fellow Jehovah's Witnesses in June 1937.

The Church became the regime's most dangerous enemy

Jehovah's Witnesses were, like communists, social democrats and trade unionists, among the Gestapo's early targets and were labelled by the Nazi regime as "enemies of the State". For other Christians, the persecution escalated when church leaders »

Gestapo's departments

Department C

C Gestapo's administration and press office kept records on all employees and handled party matters. The department was also responsible for "Schutzhaft", preventive detention – a polite term for internment in a concentration camp.

Gestapo's departments
Department D

The Gestapo's administration and press office kept records of all employees and handled party affairs. In addition, the department was responsible for "Schutzhaft", protective custody, a polite term for imprisonment in a concentration camp.

» protested against the launch of Hitler's T4 programme – the systematic killing of up to 300,000 mentally ill and disabled people in the years 1939-41. The Nazi leadership took the threat posed by the critical clergy extremely seriously. "The importance of this enemy is such that inspectors of security police and of the security service will make this group of people and the questions discussed by them their special concern," they stated.

A network of agents had to be set up immediately to monitor the bishops, and the secret police's Department B – the department for church affairs – took on the task with great zeal. Over 2,700 members of the clergy were imprisoned in Dachau alone. One was held captive for having stated that there were good folk in England too; another suffered the same fate for warning a girl who wanted to marry an SS man after abjuring the Catholic faith; yet another because he conducted a service for a deceased communist.

In the absence of concrete charges, the Gestapo invoked the security of the Reich – often on flimsy grounds. Technically speaking, the Gestapo didn't even need to justify itself. A decree issued on 10th February 1936 placed the secret police above the law. The Gestapo's decisions couldn't be appealed, and the courts were neither allowed to examine nor question its decisions. Even an acquittal in court meant nothing if the Gestapo wanted to send someone to a concentration camp. In other words, any citizen who fell into the Gestapo's clutches was left at the mercy of the secret police.

Special agents were to catch Jews

No group suffered more under Gestapo persecution than the Jews. Besides participating in the mistreatment and killing of Jews, the Gestapo also assisted SS soldiers and party thugs behind the scenes. Reports show, for example, that before the so-called Kristallnacht on 9th November 1938, the Gestapo helped pave the way for killings and destruction by ordering Jewish shopkeepers to paint their names and the Star of David on »

Historians estimate that up to two million people were part of the resistance movement in Europe. The tracking of them placed enormous pressure on the Gestapo's resources.
BUNDESARCHIV

SHUTTERSTOCK

Gestapo broke the mind and body

The Nazis' secret police could torture a confession or denunciation out of any prisoner – it was only a matter of time. The interrogations usually began with a violent bout of blows and kicks, after which the Gestapo used increasingly brutal methods that both caused terror and shattered bones.

Physical

THUMB SCREWS

The victim's fingers were placed between two pieces of iron, which were gradually tightened together using a screw clamp. The torture was extremely painful, especially if the pressure became so strong that the metal plates crushed the bones.

WHIPPING

Flogging the victim with a whip with twisted leather straps was a Gestapo speciality. The punishment was painful and humiliating, and the wounds left by the whip could, if untreated, cause serious infections.

WATER TORTURE

The executioner held the victim's head under water until he or she was close to drowning. The abuse was particularly effective when ice-cold water was used and was known to be able to force a confession from most of the Gestapo's prisoners.

Psychological

LACK OF SLEEP

Bright light, music or loud commands kept the victim awake for long periods. The lack of sleep caused the victim to lose orientation and awareness, which resulted in a state of extreme fatigue that in the worst cases could lead to death.

SCREAMS

An effective form of psychological abuse was for prisoners to listen to the torture of fellow inmates, which worked even better if the prisoner was made to believe that the screams of pain came from a close family member.

ISOLATION

Solitary confinement was frequently used as torture. The Gestapo deprived the victim of all contact with the outside world. Reports show that the isolation could last for years and cause lasting damage to the mind.

» their shop fronts. In this way, the secret police ensured that the thugs effectively targeted their victims. When the Nazis began deporting German Jews, the Gestapo also played a decisive role. Informers specialised in the role of "catchers" – agents tasked with tracking down Jews and passing the information on to the Gestapo.

The leadership also had its eyes firmly fixed on the resistance movements that throughout Western Europe sought to make the occupation difficult for German forces. To eliminate this resistance, the Gestapo used local turncoats who knew all about the local area and could easily be bought with money, services or simply the chance to be on what seemed the winning side. Among the most notorious informers was Henry Rinnan in Trondheim, Norway. At the time of Germany's occupation in April 1940, Rinnan worked as a truck driver for the Norwegian army. After being interned by the occupying forces, Rinnan was recruited as a German agent.

He proved to have good skills in talking to strangers and gaining their trust. In this way, under the cover name "Fiskvik", he succeeded in infiltrating the resistance movement in Trondheim. The information he provided led to the arrest of between 50 and 60 resistance members. In addition to infiltrating the resistance, Rinnan also set up fake resistance groups. Under the pretext of wanting to fight the occupation, he lured opponents of Nazism to join, only to betray them to the Gestapo.

From his headquarters at Jonsvannsveien 46 in Trondheim, he even tortured and killed resistance members himself. As late as April 1945, Rinnan is believed to have killed three people and disposed of their bodies by dismembering them.

At the post-war trials, Rinnan was sentenced and executed for the murder of 13 people, although historians believe there were many more. He and his group were probably responsible for up to 1,000 arrests of active resistance members and for killing more than 80 – a record of crimes that has led some to call Rinnan Gestapo's most useful non-German in Northern Europe.

Gestapo-Müller disappeared without a trace after the war

Also in Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands and France the secret police used local agents; for example, the Belgian Gestapo agent Jacques Desoubrie infiltrated several resistance groups, including the Réseau Comète, an organisation that helped Allied airmen shot down over Belgium escape back to Britain. Historians believe that Desoubrie was responsible for at least 100 arrests of the group's members.

The persecution and torture became increasingly vicious as the Germans were pressed by the resistance and the advancing Allied

The persecution and torture became increasingly vicious as the Germans were pushed back by the resistance movement .

armies. Memoirs and eyewitness accounts tell of beating, whipping and water torture and new methods as cruel as they were inventive. The list of ingenious torture methods includes presses designed to crush testicles, electrified wires attached to genitals and rectum, and burning with soldering irons.

After the Allied landing in Normandy in June 1944, the secret police intensified the hunt for Jews and resistance members. Most who survived the harsh interrogation were stuffed into cattle wagons and transported eastwards to the concentration camps, now functioning as death factories. Even as Red Army's tanks rolled into Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, the Gestapo didn't give up.

On 28th April 1945, just days before the Third Reich's final collapse, Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller personally showed up in the Führerbunker under Berlin. He came to conduct an interrogation regarding rumours that Himmler had betrayed Hitler. Allegedly, Müller returned to the Führerbunker on 30th April, the day of Hitler's suicide, and the following day. After that he disappeared from history. Some believe the Gestapo chief used his knowledge of Russia and the Soviet state to flee to the Soviet Union. Most historians consider it most likely that Müller died in the battles for Berlin and that his body ended up in a mass grave.

Whatever happened to him, Müller escaped punishment. Not everyone in the Gestapo was so lucky, but for most the employment had only limited consequences; for example, half of the former Gestapo members were officially cleared after the war and were rehired in civilian positions.

Ernst Thälmann, who in the earliest days of the Gestapo was arrested, interrogated and mistreated, never lived to see the end of the war. After being held for 11 years in solitary confinement he was transferred to the Buchenwald concentration camp in August 1944. There on 18th August 1944 he was dragged into the camp crematorium and shot. □

Gestapo's departments

Department E

The Gestapo's unit for security and counter-espionage was divided into subdivisions that handled specific geographic areas such as the eastern territories or Scandinavia. A special subdivision of Department E operated within the Reich's borders.

The French resistance became one of Gestapo's biggest challenges. They helped with espionage and sabotage on D-Day among other things.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

As the tide of war turned, the Nazi leadership prepared for total war and ordered a rapid expansion of the arms industry. Prisoners laboured in underground factories, building aircraft and rockets, or perished in chemical plants and quarries. Even German women were pulled from the kitchen and sent into the factories.

SLAVE LABOUR

kept the war machine running

A new group of forced labourers arrived at the Mauthausen concentration camp. Here, they were to quarry granite until they died, exhausted.

U.S. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Hell on Earth lay underground near the town of Nordhausen in the Harz Mountains. Here, in a vast network of dark, bomb-proof mountain tunnels, the SS-owned company Mittelwerk began producing the 14-metre-long V2 long-range rocket in December 1943. According to Hitler, this wonder weapon could crush the British, turn the tide of war and lead the Third Reich to victory.

In the tunnels, thousands of slaves toiled wearing nothing but thin, striped prison uniforms and crude wooden clogs. Through enormous gates, they had been driven down into the mine's cold and damp underworld – into the concentration camp and armaments centre Dora-Mittelbau.

Once the prisoners had turned their backs on daylight, their fate was sealed – only a few could expect to come out of the underground production halls alive. For 12 hours a day, they were forced to work at high speed assembling V2 rockets before collapsing in utter exhaustion on filthy, louse-infested mattresses in the sleeping tunnels, where the best they could hope for was a few hours of sleep.

Day and night, the rock chambers echoed with explosions from the constant expansion of the tunnels – accompanied by the deafening din of pneumatic drills and the screams from prisoners being beaten by SS guards for failing to stay on their feet.

The air was thick with dust that settled in their lungs, and the forced labourers had no opportunity to wash themselves or even take a sip of water – the factory had neither baths nor running water. The toilets consisted of crude latrines made from halved oil drums, and the food was appalling and entirely inadequate. The menu offered watery turnip soup and a lump of rancid margarine, a meal that neither filled the stomach nor gave strength for the gruelling labour.

Epidemics of pneumonia, dysentery and typhus raged among the tunnel workers, who were soon reduced to human wrecks. A French survivor, Jean Michel, later recounted the torments the sick prisoners were subjected to. "The noise bores into the brain and shears the nerves," recalled Michel, who was held at Dora. "Some deportees are too weak and collapse. They have dysentery ... no longer have the strength to sit over the barrels, even to get to them. The SS beat them. The blows are useless, they do not get up. They will suffer no more."

Our new friendship with the SS is proving very profitable.

Otto Ambros, director at the chemical company IG Farben

One by one, the prisoners succumbed. Some were hanged, supposedly for sloppiness according to the SS officers, their emaciated bodies displayed before their fellow inmates. But most died suddenly, in the middle of work, after which their bodies were stacked in a corner and removed once a day. On some days, a hundred corpses were taken to the crematorium. Around 20,000 forced labourers from Dora-Mittelbau died during the war – meaning rocket production cost four times as many lives as the V2 rockets themselves.

The prisoners in the underground rocket factory in the Harz Mountains were far from the only ones forced to toil for the Nazi arms industry. The brutal battles on the Eastern Front drained Germany of all able-bodied men, and the war industry suffered from a chronic shortage of hands.

From September 1939, when German troops invaded Poland, the Nazis began tearing people from their homes and cramming them into overcrowded trains bound for forced labour in Germany. And as the war dragged on, the concentration camps swelled with prisoners, who could be used as free labour, mostly from Eastern Europe, especially Russia and Poland.

All prisoners in the German camp system were the property of the SS, and from 1942, the SS began profiting by leasing concentration camp prisoners for slave labour in industrial and construction companies. The camps were to be self-sufficient and run as a business – the more prisoners the SS could lease out, the more money came in.

In industrial regions and near quarries, the Nazis built camps

At Krupp's factories, workers produced guns and shells for the German army.
GETTY IMAGES

A Russian woman – sent to Germany as a forced labourer – is instructed in operating a machine at a factory.
GETTY IMAGES

close to the factories using prisoner labour. Whereas in 1935, about 9,000 people were held in five concentration camps, by 1944 this number had exploded to 25 main camps with about 1,100 subcamps spread across Germany and the occupied territories.

Between 12 and 20 million prisoners were leased out during the war. Among the companies that exploited this cheap labour on a massive scale was the world's then-leading chemical conglomerate, IG Farben (originally "Interessen-Gemeinschaft Farbenindustrie AG"), which had close ties to the Nazi Party.

A subsidiary, the chemical company Degesch, also held the patent for the poison gas Zyklon B, which had been developed in the 1920s as a fast-acting pesticide – but was used by the Nazis to murder millions of people in gas chambers.

Chemical company removed Jews from the organisation

In the 1930s, IG Farben had supported the Nazis with enormous sums of money and, in an effort to please Hitler, diligently ensured that all Jewish employees were removed from the company. The majority of the board members were also members of the Nazi Party – one of them, Carl Krauch, even assisted Hermann Göring, who headed Germany's war plans.

When German troops stormed into Poland and Czechoslovakia, IG Farben had already identified the chemical plants the company wished to seize by force. The Nazis made sure to spare the factory areas from wartime destruction, allowing IG Farben to immediately continue production.

IG Farben developed synthetic petrol and "buna" rubber, both crucial to the German war effort. The fuel powered aircraft and tanks while the rubber was used in tanks, aircraft and ships.
To further ramp up production, IG Farben, with Nazi support, established a factory for synthetic rubber and petrol in 1941 a few kilometres east of the Auschwitz extermination camp in occupied Poland. A labour camp, Monowitz (also known as Auschwitz III), was set up for the mainly Jewish forced labourers.

At a meeting on 27th March 1941, the SS leadership in Auschwitz and IG Farben managers agreed on the framework »

Prisoners of war were sent to the factories

Millions of prisoners of war in the German-controlled areas were torn from their homes and sent to do forced labour for German industry.

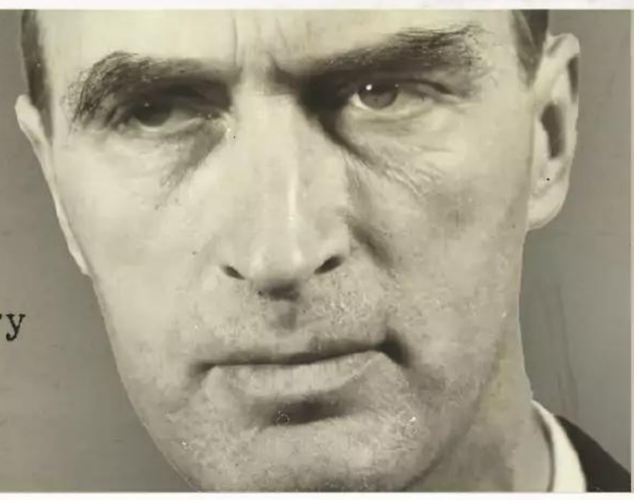
As nearly all German men were conscripted into the military during the war, the domestic industry was desperate for workers. The Third Reich solved this by forcing millions of people, primarily from the Soviet Union and Poland, into Germany, where they toiled under slave-like conditions. The forced labourers survived on meagre rations and were beaten and abused – disobedience and escape attempts were punishable by death.

In the spring of 1942, 20 per cent of the workforce in Germany were prisoners of war, concentration camp inmates or forced labourers from other countries. By 1944 this amounted to around eight million. The vast majority came from Eastern Europe, including around 3.1 million from the Soviet Union and 1.7 million from Poland.

The prisoners were used in the war industry, and large industrial complexes were also staffed solely by concentration camp inmates. At the end of the war, there were around 11 million forced labourers in Germany. Historians estimate that up to 2,000 German companies made use of forcibly conscripted workers.

Industrial magnates became Hitler's allies

Even respected business owners and manufacturers competed to become part of Hitler's inner circle. The alliance could guarantee a path to lucrative contracts and huge profits from doing business with the Nazis.



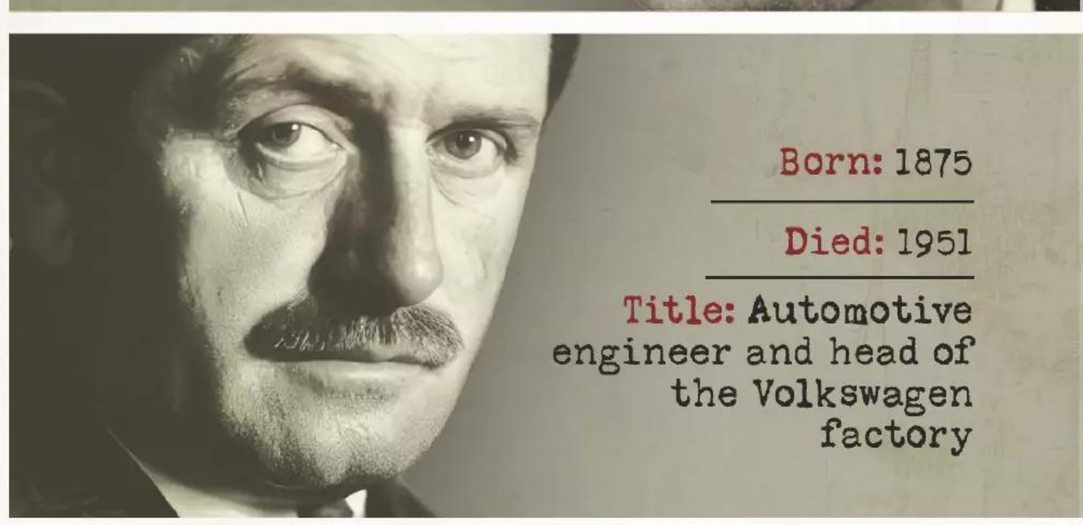
Born: 1907

Died: 1967

Title: Owner of the heavy industry group Krupp

Alfred Krupp von Bohlen

Krupp's companies produced weapons, steel and ammunition for the German war effort and earned huge sums from the armaments industry. The Krupp group used camp slaves on a large scale and profited greatly from the exclusion of Jews from German business life. During WWII, the group controlled heavy industry in several of the occupied countries. In 1947, Alfred Krupp was sentenced to seven years in prison for having used slave labour during the war.



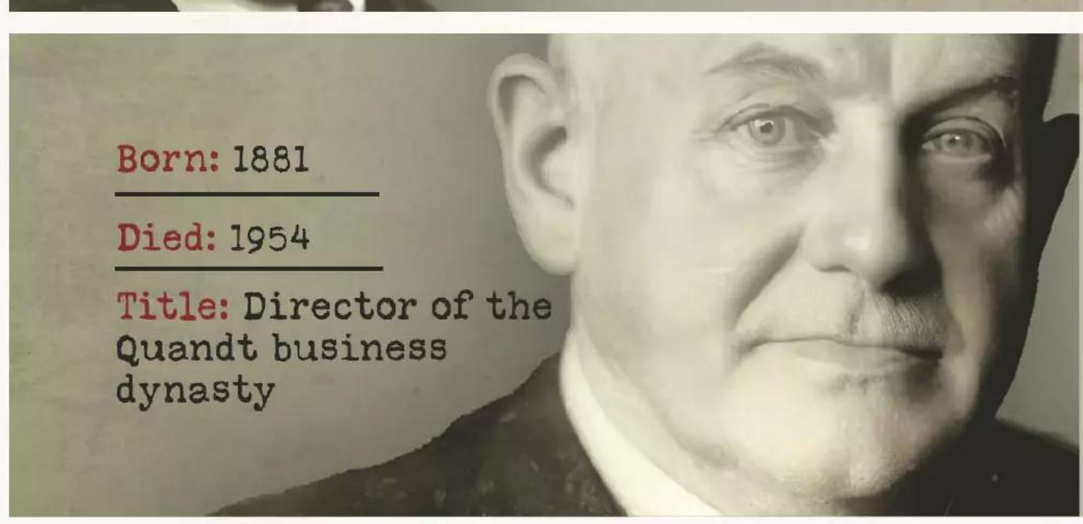
Born: 1875

Died: 1951

Title: Automotive engineer and head of the Volkswagen factory

Ferdinand Porsche

The Austrian automotive engineer Ferdinand Porsche signed a contract with the German government in 1934 to develop the people's car, Volkswagen, which was ready for production in 1938. With his son-in-law, Porsche led the new VW factory until 1945. During WWII Porsche also designed amphibious vehicles and aircraft. VW employed 15,000 forced labourers, 60 per cent of whom were prisoners in the company's nine concentration camps.



Born: 1881

Died: 1954

Title: Director of the Quandt business dynasty

Günther Quandt

The founder of the Quandt business dynasty was a member of the Nazi party, NSDAP, and belonged to the inner circle around Adolf Hitler. The industrial magnate financially supported Hitler, and he maintained a close friendship with his divorced wife, Magda Quandt, who married Joseph Goebbels in 1931. Günther Quandt's company, a major supplier of textiles, earned a fortune during World War II by delivering uniforms to the Wehrmacht.

Born: 1916

Died: 2007

Title: Director of the food company Dr Oetker

Rudolf-August Oetker

Rudolf-August Oetker was a member of the Waffen-SS when he took over as director of Dr Oetker, one of Germany's largest food companies, in 1944. Seven years earlier, in 1937, Hitler had proclaimed the company a "National Socialist model company". The management of Dr Oetker was also part of the inner circle of top Nazi Heinrich Himmler, so the food company was supplied with labour from concentration camps to build new factories.

BUNDESARCHIV

At the beginning of the 1900s Krupp was Europe's largest company. The industrial giant became crucial for German weapons production.
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

» for the new cooperation. The chemical company agreed to pay the SS three Reichsmarks a day for each unskilled worker and four Reichsmarks per day for skilled ones. Four Reichsmarks was roughly a third of what a German worker would earn. The fee went to the SS leadership, with the prisoners receiving nothing.

According to the meeting's minutes, the negotiations for what would soon develop into a murderous alliance were carried out "in mutual understanding". In a letter to the company board, IG Farben's director, Otto Ambros, later emphasised that "Our new friendship with the SS is proving very profitable."

During negotiations, the parties determined that the working day for the slave labourers would be 10-11 hours. The prisoners' productivity quota was set at 75 per cent of the output of civilian German workers, but it turned out that the SS and IG Farben had severely miscalculated: productivity only reached 30-40 per cent, as the completely debilitated and starved slave labourers could barely remain standing.

Prisoners marched over six kilometres to the factory in all weather, beaten by guards along the way. The walk exhausted their final energy reserves and many collapsed from fatigue or exposure to toxic substances they handled without protection.

Auschwitz III became a money machine

During the war, Monowitz housed around 40,000 prisoners. One of them, the young Italian chemist and author Primo Levi, later described the surroundings: "This huge entanglement of iron, concrete, mud and smoke is the negation of beauty. Its roads and buildings are named like us, by numbers or letters, not by weird and sinister names. Within its bounds not a blade of grass grows, and the soil is impregnated with the poisonous saps of coal and petroleum, and the only things alive are machines and slaves – and the former are more alive than the latter."

Around 20,000 Monowitz prisoners died of starvation and disease or were gassed – ironically, with IG Farben's poison gas – when they were too weak to work. As deadly as it was, it proved to be extremely lucrative for the Nazi regime: Auschwitz is estimated to have generated around 30 million Reichsmarks in pure profit by selling labour to various private companies.

Camp prisoners were also ordered to perform slave labour elsewhere, such as in construction, agriculture and coal mines. The latter usually amounted to a swift death sentence – the expected lifespan in the mines near Auschwitz was four to six weeks; prisoners in Monowitz typically lived three to four months after being assigned to work.

Bayer bought prisoners for experiments

That the prisoners died like flies was hardly even recorded. According to the Auschwitz commandant, Rudolf Höss, the companies weren't required to report the number of deaths »

In 1940, Hitler personally presented the Nazi gold medal to industrial magnates for their contribution to Germany's rearmament.
BUNDESARCHIV

» during production, so the exact number of slave labourers who perished is unknown.

But after the war, the camp commandant explained in an interrogation that "in enterprises with particularly severe working conditions – for instance, in mines – every month one fifth died or were, because of inability to work, sent back by the enterprises to the camps in order to be exterminated."

According to Höss, the SS – at the request of the businesses – continuously sent new prisoners so that firms could maintain their pace. And it was up to the private companies to take the initiative if they wanted labour from the concentration camps: "Prisoners were sent to enterprises only after the enterprises had made a request for concentration camp prisoners."

He later explained the arrangement and the manufacturers' willingness to take part in the extermination of slave labourers. The forced labourers sold to the pharmaceutical company Bayer, which was also part of IG Farben, were subjected to particularly unimaginable suffering. Used as human guinea pigs,

Conglomerates helped Hitler

German companies formed the cornerstones of Hitler's rearmament and helped keep the Nazi war machine running. The industrial giants provided weapons, chemicals, armoured vehicles and banking services.

A crucial prerequisite for the Nazi war machine was German industry, which contributed everything from poison gas to weapons to armoured vehicles and aircraft. Concentration camp prisoners were exploited as cheap labour. The chemical conglomerate IG Farben became a key producer for Hitler's regime during the war. Formed in 1925 through a merger of Germany's leading factories in chemical and pharmaceutical industries, it produced ammunition, explosives, synthetic rubber and coal-based petrol along with the poison gas Zyklon B, used for mass murder in the gas chambers.

they were ordered to test new medication, and Bayer paid the SS 170 Reichsmarks per test subject.

In a letter to the SS leadership at Auschwitz, Bayer reported that one of their experiments hadn't gone to plan. "Despite their emaciated condition they were acceptable..." and later "The experiments were concluded. All persons died. We will soon get in touch regarding a new shipment."

Car factories received cheap labour

IG Farben used a total of over 80,000 forced and slave labourers during the war. But major German car manufacturers such as Volkswagen, BMW, Daimler-Benz and Opel also recruited thousands of people as cheap labour from the concentration camps. They helped maintain production of, among other things, military vehicles and aircraft engines at their factories.

Volkswagen had access to labour from nine camps, while BMW used slave labourers for the production of two- and four-wheeled vehicles and engines for fighter aircraft from camps like Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. Siemens, which produced electronic components for weapons and other war equipment, also profited through its cooperation with the SS.

Heading the 100-year-old company was Carl Friedrich von Siemens. Although he wasn't a Nazi and had even distanced himself from Hitler and his regime, Siemens had no qualms about using forced labour. The company had placed several of its factories near Auschwitz and seven other concentration camps, and in 1944 the prisoners made up 50,000 – nearly one fifth – of Siemens' total workforce of 244,000 employees.

Uniforms came from Hugo Boss

Likewise, the menswear company Hugo Boss used camp labour, though on a significantly smaller scale than Siemens, for example. The founder, Hugo Boss, joined the Nazi Party in 1931 – not only to secure a bulging order book but also because he was an ardent supporter of National Socialism.

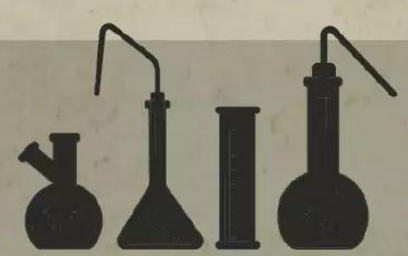
The membership paid off quickly: orders for piles of uniforms for the SA stormtroopers and the boys of the Hitler Youth poured in from party headquarters. Business went so well for them that Hugo Boss eventually earned the nickname "Hitler's Tailor".

With the help of the Nazi regime, from 1940 the company received supplies of Polish and French slave labourers, who toiled 12 hours a day in the factory in Metzingen near Stuttgart, where they sewed, among other things, the infamous, sharply tailored uniforms for the SS.

And unlike several other companies that cooperated with the Nazis, all members of the management at Hugo Boss were party members – they turned up for work in uniform and demanded that the slave labourers salute them with an outstretched arm.

Women took over

At many of the factories around Germany, the concentration camp prisoners were forced to work alongside civilian »



CHEMICALS INDUSTRY

IG Farben:
Produced items like the poison gas Zyklon B, ammunition, synthetic rubber and synthetic petrol.

Chemische Werke Hüls:
With help from concentration prisoners, the company produced synthetic rubber for the war industry.

Wacker Chemie:
Produced, among other things, silicone for sealing electrical components in cars, planes and radios.

WEAPONS INDUSTRY

Krupp:
Produced field artillery, anti-aircraft guns, ammunition and virtually all war materiel requiring steel.

Siemens:
Experts in communication equipment for the likes of submarines and tanks.

Rheinmetall:
Produced advanced artillery and tanks.

Junkers:
Planes and aircraft engines.

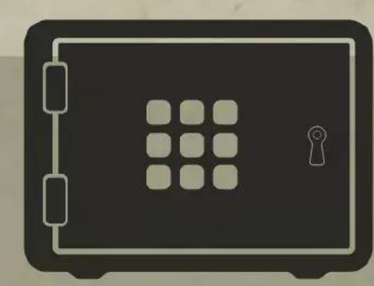
CAR INDUSTRY

Volkswagen:
Sent passenger cars, open terrain vehicles and other war materiel to the front.

BMW:
Were experts in motorcycles.

Mercedes-Benz:
Had contracts for Nazi leadership's passenger cars as well as aircraft and ship engines.

Opel:
Produced military trucks and armoured vehicles.



FINANCIAL SECTOR

Deutsche Bank:
Nazi party's primary bank profited enormously from assets seized from Jewish firms and families.

Allianz:
Insurance for Auschwitz as well as other concentration camps.

Dresdner Bank:
Financed construction of concentration camps and the SS. Exchanged gold from teeth of the dead in extermination camps.

» labourers, both from Germany and other countries. Unlike the prisoners though, the civilians were paid for their efforts and generally had far more lenient working conditions – and in a groundbreaking shift for Nazi Germany, part of the workforce consisted of women.

According to Nazi ideology, a woman's calling was to bear children and tend to the home. But during the war, that ideal came under immense pressure because the need for women in production grew steadily in line with rearmament and also as a result of the enormous loss of men at the front.

Both industry and agriculture were starved of labour, so in the late 1930s the regime introduced the so-called Pflichtjahr. This was a compulsory year during which women under 25 were required to perform duty work in households and on farms. Launching a massive propaganda campaign, the Nazi regime also aimed to encourage women – or the "homeland front", as they were called – to increase their labour efforts voluntarily. Recruitment campaigns with slogans saying "Women, help win the war!" were designed to lure mothers out of the kitchen and into the factories.

Business went so well for the clothing manufacturer that Hugo Boss eventually earned the nickname "Hitler's Tailor"

Even Hitler, who for years had thundered that the proper place for German women was in the home, now urged women to enter industry. In a speech to the Reichstag in 1941, the Führer stated, "Millions of German women and girls are working in factories and workshops and in offices and there, too, they give a good account of themselves. It is not unfair if we demand that still many hundreds of thousands of others should take these millions of working German *Volksgenossinnen* [Female national comrades] as an example."

Weapons factories in particular cried out for women's labour, as the demand for weapons and ammunition only continued to grow as the war dragged on. Already in 1943, around 1.2 million German women worked in the arms industry. Although this was an unusually high number, it was still far from enough to meet growing demand. In September 1944, when enemy fronts were approaching the Reich's borders, Hitler demanded that German

Assembly lines couldn't keep up with the demand for new weapons – even working around the clock. In 1944 alone the Germans lost as many as 10,000 tanks.

GETTY IMAGES

workers, both women and men, roll up their sleeves and put in extra effort.

In all enterprises and companies where the workload required it, the minimum working hours was to be raised to 60 hours a week according to a new decree from the Führer. Such a high weekly workload had been previously unheard of but was still much shorter than the 84 hours that some forced labourers were increasingly made to toil every single week, all year round.

Death's staircase had 186 steps

One of the Nazis' most notorious labour camps was the concentration camp Mauthausen, established in 1938 in occupied Austria. During the war, the Nazis interned around 190,000 people in this very special hell on earth, where death reaped frequently, swiftly and arbitrarily. The enormous granite deposits in the area were the reason the SS had established the camp precisely here. And following the principle of "extermination through labour" the undernourished prisoners were forced to toil carving stone, digging gravel and hauling blocks of stone that were to be used in larger construction projects.

Discipline was ruthless and the guards sadistic. Those who couldn't manage the exhausting work were abused and killed – for example, the SS guards used a devilish method where they forced prisoners to jump off the edge of the quarry. The SS cynically called this form of murder "parachute jumping".

The SS guards also ordered prisoners to carry stone blocks weighing up to 50 kg up a high, steep staircase with 186 steps, the *Todesstiege* ("Death's staircase"). Many stumbled and dropped the stone, which then crushed the legs and feet of those following behind. Mercilessly the guards beat those prisoners who'd dropped their load, after which they were ordered to carry a new stone block up.

In time, Mauthausen gained more than 40 subcamps where prisoners were forced to work for the armaments and war industries. Prisoners from the branch camp Gusen, for example, toiled in the secret underground factory B8 Bergkristall, where the fighter aircraft Messerschmitt Me 262 was mass-produced. In another, Ebensee, forced labourers to manufacture rockets.

Even compared with other labour camps the death rate at Mauthausen was especially high – starvation, disease, abuse, hard quarry work and murder cost about 100,000 prisoners their lives. How many of them were executed in the neck-shooting facility which the SS installed in 1941 in the basement next to the crematorium is unknown.

When Allied troops approached Mauthausen in the last weeks of the war in 1945, the SS desperately tried to erase all traces of their gruesome crimes. They destroyed the gas chamber and the neck-shooting facility and burned all documents and case files in the crematorium. On 3rd May the camp staff fled, and two days later, on 5th May 1945, US troops arrived, liberating some 40,000 prisoners who clung to life, sick and weakened.

The war was over, and shortly afterwards the reckoning began with the companies and manufacturers who had helped the Nazis. The large chemical company IG Farben was split into smaller companies, but most firms were allowed to continue after the war, and their owners received only mild prison sentences.

But the memory of their role in the atrocities of World War II was forever written into their company history. □

Workers were quickly worked to death

The Nazi plan was clear: able-bodied prisoners were to work themselves to death. They often died within less than four months of hard labour.

"Extermination through labour" – or in German: "Vernichtung durch Arbeit" – was a morbid practice used by the Nazis in their concentration camps. Not all prisoners and Jews were killed on arrival – instead, those deemed fit for work were forced to toil until they dropped dead from industry's inhuman conditions. The idea was to exploit prisoners to the last drop of blood before they collapsed from exhaustion or were executed because they could no longer stand.

Prisoners worked 10-12 hours daily, enduring blows and kicks all day if they failed to meet quotas. In the winter cold, they wore only thin, striped uniforms and usually had nothing but watery cabbage soup to eat. On average, forced labourers died after about four months – the death rate was so high that a manufacturer calculated needing 80 new workers each month to replace those who died.

In the Mauthausen camp, prisoners were forced to carry granite blocks up the "stairs of death" to wear down and exterminate as many as possible.

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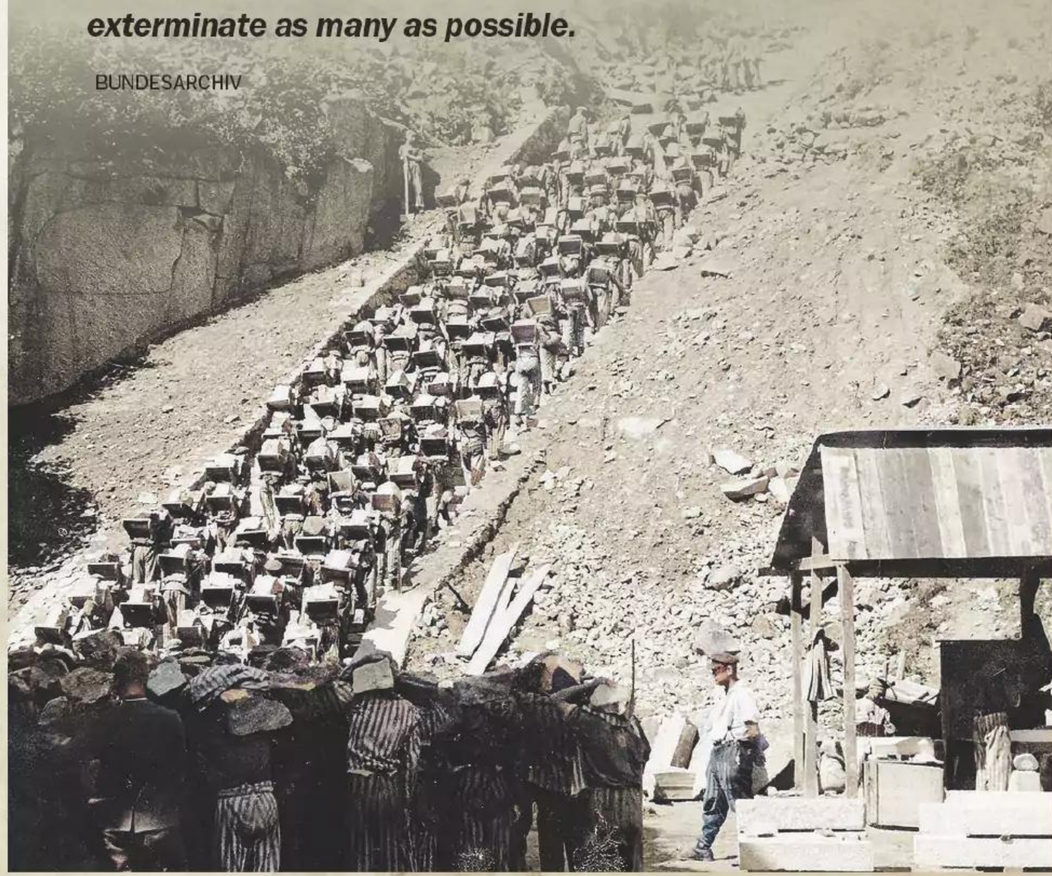

The Luftwaffe and the navy were also, on paper, under Keitel's command, although strategic leadership was entrusted to others.
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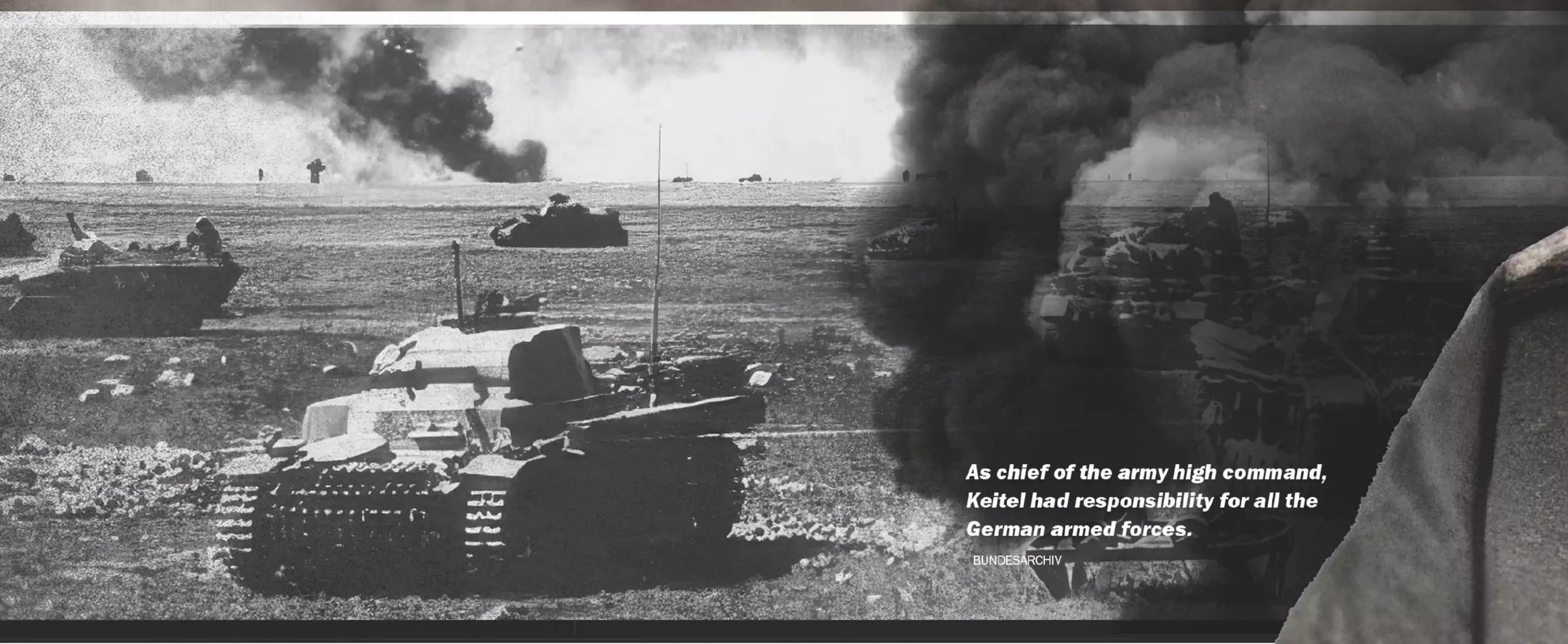
KEITEL BECAME HITLER'S IRON FIST

When German troops marched into Poland in 1939, the Nazi Reich started World War II. From France to Russia, the Wehrmacht swept all resistance aside. One man supported Hitler's ambitious war of conquest more than anyone else: the chief of the Wehrmacht High Command, Wilhelm Keitel, who carried out the Führer's will – at any cost.



As chief of the army high command, Keitel had responsibility for all the German armed forces.
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Wilhelm Keitel was a mediocre officer, but blind loyalty to Hitler secured him the post as the army's supreme commander

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In July 1940, Hitler returned to Berlin to celebrate his victory over France.
NATIONAL ARCHIVES

The jubilation wouldn't end when Adolf Hitler arrived at Anhalter Bahnhof in Berlin at 15.00 in the afternoon on 6th July 1940. The German army had just conquered Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France, and after a tour of the occupied territories, Hitler was now being welcomed home as a hero. To the sound of the Bavarian marching anthem *Badenweiler Marsch*, the dictator made his way to the open-topped car that would take him to the Reich Chancellery a few streets away.

Along the route, the pavements were packed with flag-waving Germans. Cheers of "hurrah" and "heil" nearly drowned out the military music and the bells ringing from the city's church towers. When the motorcade reached the Reich Chancellery and Hitler disappeared into the monumental building, the shouts grew louder.

"We want to see our Führer," was the cry until Hitler stepped out on to the balcony. For a moment, he looked out over the crowd. Then he turned and waved forward his three most trusted generals. Among the men on the balcony was Wilhelm Keitel, general and chief of the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) – the Armed Forces High Command. That he was among the chosen few was no coincidence. Keitel more than anyone else had, as Hitler's subordinate, helped shape the German army into what it was – and what it would remain throughout the war: the extended arm of Hitler and the Nazi state.

100,000
The number of soldiers Germany was allowed to have according to the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler soon broke the agreement.

Rearmament took place at lightning speed

At the time of this celebration – in the summer of 1940 – Germany's army was the most powerful in Europe. From a German perspective, this seemed almost like a miracle. Just seven years earlier, when Hitler seized power in 1933, the standing army consisted of a mere 100,000 men – the maximum number allowed under the harsh peace terms dictated in the Treaty of Versailles after World War I. Although the Versailles Treaty forbade any form of rearmament, weapons factories were now springing up everywhere on Hitler's orders. In 1935, Germany's new leader showed his true colours. He openly declared that Germany would no longer adhere to the peace terms but would build an army of 500,000 men. At the same time, he introduced conscription, which would apply to all German men between 18 and 45 years of age.

Shortly after taking power, Hitler required officers to swear an oath of allegiance to him personally instead of to the Fatherland and the constitution as before. Nevertheless, in the early years of the regime, the army wasn't run by the Nazi Party like Germany's other institutions. Hitler was determined to change this, and in 1938 an unexpected golden opportunity arose.

The story was the sort that, under other circumstances, would never have made it past the gossip columns of the weekly magazines. In January 1938, the Minister of War, 60-year-old widower Werner von Blomberg, married a woman of just 24. Shortly afterwards, it emerged that the woman appeared in police records as both a prostitute and a nude model.

The outcry that followed in the conservative officer corps made it necessary for Hitler to dismiss Blomberg. The moral indignation grew even stronger when it was rumoured that Blomberg's natural successor, Werner von Fritsch, was homosexual with a penchant for young boys from the Hitler Youth. The story was pure fabrication, concocted by Fritsch's enemies in the Nazi leadership, but the inflamed atmosphere meant that he too had to step down for "health reasons".

The scandals came as a godsend for Hitler. Blomberg had on several occasions spoken out against Hitler's war plans, and now the chance arose to find a less independently-minded officer. At a final meeting with Blomberg, Hitler enquired whether the general's chief of staff, Wilhelm Keitel, might be considered as a replacement.

"[Keitel] is just the man who runs my office," said Blomberg dismissively. "That's exactly the man I'm looking for," Hitler replied immediately. A few days later, on 27th January 1938, Keitel was asked to report to the Führer.

Jews were purged from the army

Keitel wasn't offered the post of Minister of War; Hitler abolished that position on 4th February 1938. As its replacement, he created by decree the OKW, which oversaw the war economy, military matters and intelligence. Above the high command – and Keitel – stood only one person: Hitler.

The arrangement gave Hitler instant control of the army with Keitel as intermediary, and the new man in the job was perfect for the role of obedient puppet-master. As Blomberg's chief of staff, Keitel had assisted his superior in early attempts to »

Guderian

Born: 1888 **Died:** 1954

Rank during the war: Colonel General

Major achievements: Introduction of blitzkrieg tactics in Germany, crucial in the victory over France in 1940

Guderian created the blitzkrieg

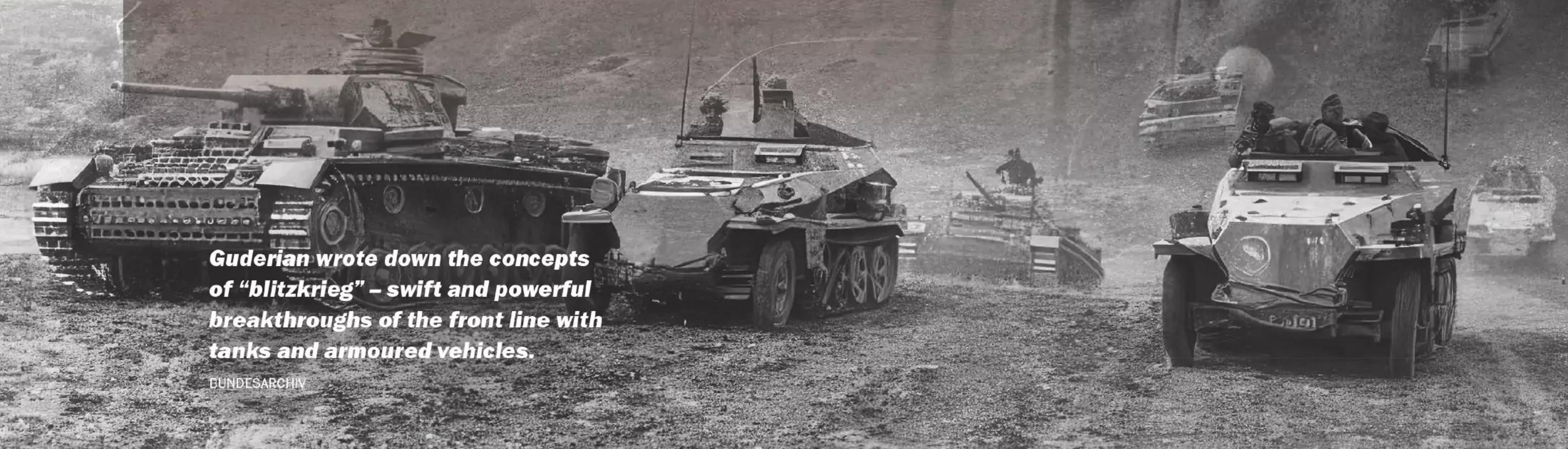
Taught by the trench warfare of World War I, the German officer Heinz Guderian devised "Blitzkrieg" – a tactic that would prove invincible in the early years of the war.

Heinz Guderian revolutionised German warfare in 1937. In his book *Achtung Panzer*, he described a new tactic – one which aimed to break through enemy defence lines quickly using tank forces supported by aircraft and motorised infantry units.

As a general, Guderian carried out his new blitzkrieg at the front. This was especially true in France, where, as commander-in-chief on 15th May 1940, he led his armoured troops to victory in the Battle of Sedan. The event, according to military historians, effectively sealed the fate of both France and Belgium.

Guderian later took part in the war on the Eastern Front but was dismissed after clashing with Hitler. From July 1944, he served as chief of the general staff. Captured by the Americans on 10th May 1945, he never faced punishment.

Guderian never entirely escaped the spell of Nazism, as shown by secret audio recordings while interned by the Americans. "The fundamental principles were fine", he said in a conversation with two fellow prisoners.



Guderian wrote down the concepts of "blitzkrieg" – swift and powerful breakthroughs of the front line with tanks and armoured vehicles.

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Rommel

Born: 1891 Died: 1944
Rank during the war: Field marshal
Greatest achievements: Campaign in Africa, defence at D-Day, attempted coup against Hitler at the Wolf's Lair

Rommel became the Allies' terror

Erwin Rommel became famous as commander of the German forces in Africa. Known as "the Desert Fox", he struck fear into the enemy.

Erwin Rommel was born into a family with no military traditions but proved himself an excellent soldier during World War I. In the 1930s he served as a teacher at a military academy and wrote textbooks on the role of the infantry and new opportunities for offensive warfare using tanks.

He later put these theories into practice, for example during the invasion of France, where he successfully employed the new German tactic of blitzkrieg. Rommel brought his European experience with him when, in 1941, he was appointed commander of the army's Afrika Korps. In the burning heat and desert sands of North Africa, a series of daring victories earned him the nickname "the Desert Fox" and Hitler's great admiration.

After defeat in Africa, Rommel was responsible for defending Normandy's beaches on D-Day in 1944. He carried out the task with great ingenuity, including the construction of Rommel's "asparagus" – buried poles intended to destroy Allied gliders.

When it later emerged that Rommel knew of the assassination attempt on Hitler on 20th July 1944, he was forced to take his own life.

For two years, Rommel fought in Africa against the British and Americans. Even when outnumbered, he managed to win several major battles.
BUNDESARCHIV

» subject the army to Nazism; among other things, he had participated in purges of Jews and political enemies among officers and soldiers, who he willingly handed over to the Gestapo. Most important of all, Keitel, the son of a farmer, was not part of the aristocratic elite that otherwise made up the top of the army. And although Keitel only joined the Nazi Party late, he worked for the cause with such burning fervour that in 1937 Hitler awarded him the golden party badge, a distinction normally reserved for the "old fighters", party members who had followed the Führer all the way.

In 1942, the German army was halted in the ruins of Stalingrad. The battle for the city became a decisive turning point.
BUNDESARCHIV

Keitel to ensure annexation of Austria

Keitel's first task was literally to be an extra, a role played out when, on 10th February, just days after his appointment, he was ordered into the lounge of Hitler's residence at the Berghof on the Obersalzberg. Hitler was holding a meeting with the Austrian chancellor, Kurt Schuschnigg, who the dictator was trying to pressure into appointing a Nazi puppet government with a view to annexing the country.

Whether Schuschnigg knew who Keitel was remains uncertain, but the signal was unmistakable. And the sight of the broad-shouldered general, along with the threat of a German invasion, did indeed prompt him to immediately sign Hitler's demands. On the morning of 12th March 1938, the Wehrmacht's 8th Army marched into Austria, which subsequently became the Nazi state's first conquest.

The night before the invasion, Keitel was bombarded with calls from nervous officers in the Wehrmacht's top ranks. They feared the overt annexation would spark an international crisis. Keitel refused to pass their anxieties on to Hitler, suggesting that had the Führer heard about it, his judgement on the army's senior officers would have been crushing. The officers' fears proved unfounded. Apart from vague protests, the world's leading nations did nothing to curb Hitler's expansionist ambitions. At the same time, Keitel had taken on the role he would play to perfection throughout the war – as the man who ensured that Hitler always heard what he wanted to hear, and that nothing stood in the army's way.

Prior to the invasion of Poland, he flatly rejected the army's request to conduct a war game – an exercise that could predict the likely outcome of the invasion. The exercise merely aimed to find arguments against Hitler's decision, he believed. He also dismissed concerns about the reaction of the European great powers. Keitel told a senior officer at the high command's office that the dictator had described the French as "a degenerate, pacifist people" and the English as "much too decadent to provide real aid to the Poles".

As for France's and Britain's response, Keitel was disastrously wrong. On 3rd September, just three days after the army's invasion of Poland, both countries declared war on Germany. On the other hand, the generals' fears of a German defeat also proved unfounded. The Nazis' intense rearmament had created a large and well-equipped army, and soon the Wehrmacht was storming through Europe. During the campaign of conquest, the Germans employed a new tactic, *blitzkrieg* – lightning war. The tactic involved using overwhelming force – consisting of tanks followed by half-track vehicles and supported by fighter planes – to break through weak points in the enemy's lines, encircle forces, and quickly destroy supply and communication centres. Within a few months in the spring and summer of 1940, the Wehrmacht succeeded in subjugating Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. Greatest of all was the triumph when arch-enemy France, on 17th June, asked for an armistice. In his headquarters in the small Belgian village of Brüly-de-Peche, the otherwise reserved Hitler took a few triumphant dance steps, slapping his thighs with joy. A moved Wilhelm Keitel declared the Führer "the greatest warlord of all time". A few weeks later, he received the people of Berlin's acclaim alongside Hitler on the balcony of the Reich Chancellery.

Soldiers were permitted to commit war crimes

On 19th July, Keitel was rewarded again when Hitler promoted him to field marshal. Now the dictator's closest confidant, he clearly relished the honour and Hitler valued him greatly. When Keitel hinted to Hitler that invading the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 might not be wise, the field marshal's bank account suddenly grew by one million Reichsmarks. His criticism stopped and he now devoted himself more than ever to subordinating the army to the Führer's will.

For instance, he ensured through various decrees that the Wehrmacht's soldiers could participate in the war of extermination in the East with impunity.

A decree issued on 13th May 1941 stated that "acts committed by Wehrmacht personnel or followers against enemy civilians, even if the act is a military crime or offence, may go unpunished". This provision meant that German soldiers could freely loot, murder and rape without fear of the consequences.

Later orders dictated "ruthless and vigorous measures against Bolshevik inciters, guerrillas, saboteurs, Jews, and the complete elimination of all active and passive resistance" and the »

As chief of the German forces, it was Wilhelm Keitel who signed Germany's surrender on 8th May 1945.
BUNDESARCHIV

» immediate execution of Soviet political commissars. Keitel also signed the *Nacht und Nebel* (Night and Fog) decree, allowing soldiers to deport resistance fighters in Western Europe to concentration camps. His role as the link between Hitler and the army was crucial.

Keitel assumed full responsibility for the atrocities

Criticism of the army's increasingly brutal conduct was something Keitel never tolerated – especially when it came from the army's elite officers. "The objections arise from the military concept of chivalrous warfare. This war is the destruction of an ideology. Therefore I approve and back the measures", he noted in the autumn of 1942 in the margin of an internal report criticising the high death rate among Russian prisoners of war.

Keitel's aversion to criticism became so extreme that the Abwehr, the military intelligence service, began disguising bad news as intercepted enemy reports. Meanwhile, setbacks mounted. Where German troops had once advanced swiftly in North Africa and the Soviet Union, the Wehrmacht suffered major defeats in 1942. In November, the Allies pushed back the Afrika Korps near El Alamein, and Soviet forces encircled the 300,000-strong German 6th Army in Stalingrad.

Prominent generals pleaded with Hitler to allow the 6th Army to fight its way out, but he stood firm. "Fortress Stalingrad" was to be held at all costs. As a last resort, they asked Keitel to persuade Hitler. Keitel agreed, but changed his mind on the day. With confident strides, he walked over to the map table in the meeting room and placed his finger on the 6th Army's position. "My Führer! Do not leave the Volga!" he declared.

The decision led to disaster. Over the following months, Soviet forces tightened their grip on the Germans. On 31st January 1943, the 6th Army surrendered; 90,000 men were taken captive, but only 6,000 survived.

The fiasco didn't prevent Keitel from issuing similar orders to Rommel's embattled Afrika Korps and to the otherwise steadfast General Walter Model when his forces were encircled at the Rhine. Keitel's unswerving belief that Hitler was never wrong always ended any discussion.

As the Allies advanced and the army's situation became hopeless, Keitel tightened the screws on his soldiers. In January 1945, he issued a decree allowing the death penalty to be carried out without trial, even for officers. Any officer who, without permission, gave an order to retreat would also be arrested immediately and, if necessary, dealt with on the spot.

In the end, however, Keitel had to admit that the war was lost. On 8th May 1945, he signed Germany's unconditional surrender. Keitel was subsequently brought before the war crimes tribunal in Nuremberg. There, he attempted to deny responsibility, but without success. On 1st October 1946, Keitel was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity and sentenced to death by hanging. "All for Germany" were his last words when he climbed the scaffold 15 days later. □

Model

Born: 1891 **Died:** 1945

Rank during the war: General field marshal

Greatest achievements: Defence on the Eastern and Western Fronts, including Rzhev and Arnhem

Model was the master of defence

When the tide of war turned, a man was praised for his skill in defensive warfare: the monocle-wearing Walter Model.

As the son of a music teacher, Walter Model wasn't destined for a military career. However, inspired by an uncle who was an infantry officer, he joined as an officer cadet.

After World War I, he remained in the Weimar Republic's army, the Reichswehr and rose through the ranks. His career accelerated in World War II, where loyalty to the Nazi Party earned him several promotions. In 1942, he took command of the 9th Army on the Eastern Front.

As the war began to turn against Germany, Model proved his worth. On several occasions, he managed to defend positions that had been considered hopeless. One example of this was when Model held his ground at the town of Rzhev, north of Moscow, through three battles.

His ability to avert or delay catastrophic defeats earned him the nickname "Hitler's Fireman".

While the dictator lost faith in generals born into the aristocracy, Model's middle-class background and loyalty secured him the Führer's continued trust.

When the war was lost and Model was ordered to surrender in April 1945, he committed suicide.

Walter Model was sent to the Eastern Front to stop the Red Army – an impossible task despite the general's abilities.
BUNDESARCHIV

HITLER'S HENCHMEN

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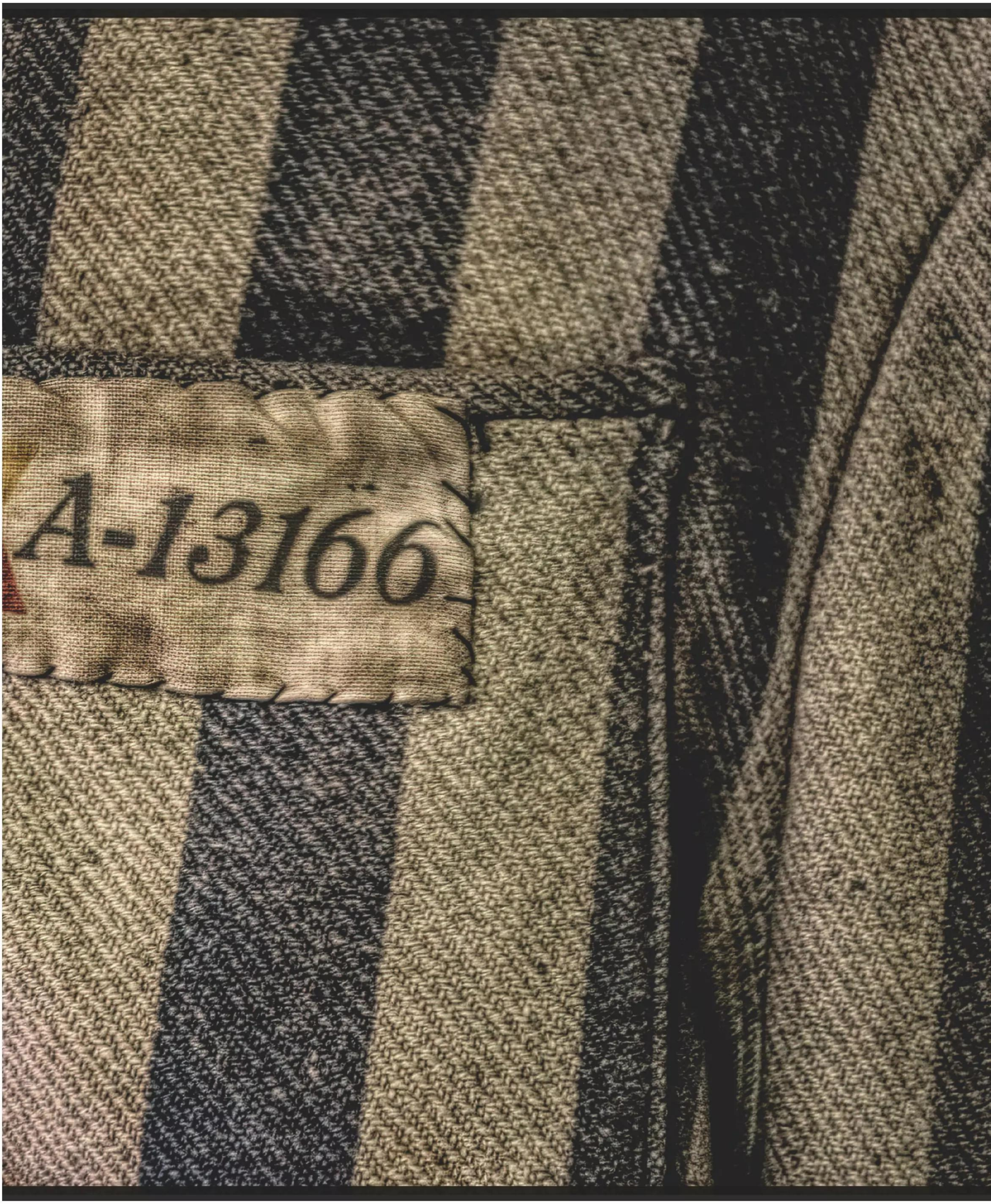
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HITLER'S HENCHMEN

For 12 years, Adolf Hitler ruled over his terrifying regime. Behind him stood men such as the cynical SS chief Heinrich Himmler and the brutal lawyer Hans Frank. But wealthy industrialists, office workers and schoolteachers also took part in Nazism's crimes. They built weapons for the war industry, fed information to the Gestapo and indoctrinated Germany's youth to die for the Nazi cause.

- Russian architect invented race theory
- Scout leaders and schoolteachers led the brainwashing
- SS took on mass murder
- Hitler's unholy trinity
- Thug army secured power
- Party staff became Hitler's enforcers
- Governor spread terror
- Gestapo watched everything
- Slave labour kept the war machine running
- Keitel became Hitler's iron fist

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124 PAGES ON THE MEN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE NAZIS' CRIMES